Rain Dragon

VraieEsprit

Bleach

Complete

Created by FicLab

www.ficlab.com

Rain Dragon

VraieEsprit

Copyright Information

This ebook was automatically created by FicLab v1.0.110 on December 8th, 2024, based on content retrieved from www.fanfiction.net/s/4581771/.

The content in this book is copyrighted by VraieEsprit or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at www.ficlab.com/author-faq.

This story was first published on October 7th, 2008, and was last updated on December 19th, 2008.

FicLab ID: _XeYakWr/m4g6g30r/10700E581

Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
Prologue: Rainbow's End
Chapter One: Midnight Chimera
Chapter Two: Normality
Chapter Three: The Mirror Of Blood
Chapter Four: Reflections
Chapter Five: Under The Radar
Chapter Six: Inner Instinct
Chapter Seven: The Princess & the Dragon
Chapter Eight: Past Ghosts
Chapter Nine: Captain of the Gotei 13
Chapter Ten: One's True Form
Chapter Eleven: Entering the Senkai Gate
Chapter Twelve: The Unknown Key
Chapter Thirteen:Baboon, Dragon & Sakura
Chapter Fourteen: Old Bonds
Chapter Fifteen: Hassuiryou
Chapter Sixteen: High Stakes
Chapter Seventeen: Jester's Gambit
Chapter Eighteen: Dragon vs Snake
Chapter Nineteen: Ukitake's Confession
Chapter Twenty: Baiting The Snare
Chapter Twenty One: The Dragon's Soul
Chapter Twenty Two: For Want Of A Sword
Chapter Twenty Three: Cherry Rain
Chapter Twenty Four: Into The Crossfire
Chapter Twenty Five: In Memoriam
Chapter Twenty Six:The Kurotsuchi Affair
Chapter Twenty Seven: Closing The Book
Epilogue: Beneath The Dragon's Wings

Summary

title	Rain Dragon
author	VraieEsprit
source	https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4581771/
published	October 7th, 2008
updated	December 19th, 2008
words	225,828
chapters	29
status	Complete
rating	Fiction T
tags	Adventure, Anime/Manga, Bleach, Complete, Fanfiction, Fantasy, Ichigo K., Uryuu I.

Description

Set at end of SS arc. Ishida's having strange dreams that relate to the massacre of the Quincy 200 yrs ago. Meanwhile in SS, the Gotei 13 are picking up the pieces of the recent betrayal-and digging up the bones of an ancient one. Complete! Thanks all! :D

Prologue: Rainbow's End

Introduction and Disclaimer

"Quincy no hokori ni kakete…"

This is probably the only Bleach fanfic I'll ever write, but I had to write it anyhow. ;) It sort of came about because I had a major writer's block in one of my other fics and needed an outlet, so it'll be interesting to see where it ends up :P

This is set at the end of the Soul Society Arc, after the band have saved Rukia and returned to the real world. It's after the start of the autumn term at Ichigo's school, but before the appearance of the Vaizard and probably could/should replace the Bount Arc from the anime, though not necessarily. (Time gets a bit hazy at this point. Gomen.) Also in the manga I don't think Ichigo tells Ishida he knows about the missing powers. I'm not sure what I'm doing with this yet. But meh. It's fanfic. :)

The story is called Rain Dragon because that's the meaning of Ishida's given name, Uryuu. The inspiration for this story came partly from that, partly from Ichigo's misreading of Uryuu's name as Ametatsu in the anime when reading the class listings (Ametatsu is an alternative reading for the same kanji, 雨竜), and partly from my general love of Ishida as a character.

There will probably (er, definitely) be some Rukia/Renji and Ishida/Orihime hints in this. (And maybe on occasion more than hints, though nothing x-rated :)). (No offence to IchiRuki shippers, I like that pairing too, though probably not as much as the two mentioned)

This story is also fairly Quincy orientated, and I've done a lot of invention on the part of the Quincy who existed at the time of the massacre. I've tried to keep in with known facts as much as possible, but if my timing is out, meh, gomen :S It's a lot of data to take in at once.

Oh yeah. I watch/read Bleach in Japanese. I've tried to be as coherent as possible. But I'm of the school of thought which includes the terms "Shinigami", "Reiatsu" and so on. I'm sorry. Soul Reapers and Spiritual Pressure sounds screwed up :S

Bleach is copyright to Kubo Tite and so are all characters referenced from the original manga that appear in this story. I don't

own Bleach and this is just a (very) random fan musing ;)

Rain Dragon
A fanfiction by VraieEsprit
Prologue: Rainbow's End

The sun was setting on the horizon.

With a heavy sigh, the young man leant back on his elbows, casting a sidelong glance at the slim figure that sat alongside him. She was half-silhouetted by the spreading twilight, yet even so he could see every outline and feature on her face, and despite himself he smiled.

No matter what the time of day, she was always beautiful.

"What's wrong?"

At his glance, his companion stirred, sending him a quizzical look. "You seem overly pensive — is something the matter?"

"Why would it be?" The young man shook his head. "I'm here with you, and we're alone, for once. The world is peaceful. The sky is clear. Why would I be troubled? This is just the way I'd like things to always be."

"Then why the heavy sigh?" The girl demanded. "I know you by now… that's the sign you're keeping something from me. What is it, Ametatsu-san? You can tell me, surely? Or does it relate… is it about… Soul Society?"

"Soul Society." Ametatsu grimaced, shaking his head. "You wouldn't believe how little I want to go back there. Seireitei is full of people hell-bent on nothing more than military precision and following order and rank. This place is a whole different environment. And you're here. If I could, Niji, I'd stay here forever. But as it is…"

"I thought so." Niji rearranged her heavy skirts absently, biting her lip. "You're being recalled, aren't you?"

"Not yet." Ametatsu shook his head. "But it will come. I suppose I worry what I'll do… when it does."

"Will it be soon, do you think?" Niji asked hesitantly. Ametatsu shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope not." He owned. "Not just for you and I, Niji, but for the sake of these negotiations. If we're recalled, it means that the Central 46 have decided not to continue discussions and have come to some kind of formal decision one way or another. If I am recalled, I will have to go. But I'm hoping it isn't going to get to that point. After all, these last few months we've definitely found common ground. There is hope — I really believe

that. That there can be a compromise between Quincy and Shinigami — I'm staking everything I have on that hope."

"And that's your official position, or your heart's?" Niji asked lightly. Ametatsu looked rueful.

"Both." He replied, fingering the edge of the white haori as he did so. "This signifies that I'm sworn to do whatever's best to protect Soul Society and more, this world from harm. That's what I swore to do when I became a captain, and what I mean to do. To me, that means protecting the Quincy as much as it does protecting the ordinary people that swarm these streets without even seeing us pass them by. That's why I want to continue the talks. Admittedly, not all of the clans are as receptive to the idea as your father and your uncle, but even so…"

"The Ishida clan are pragmatists as well as top-notch fighters." Niji smiled. "We know that there's no sense in taking on an army of Shinigami when the only thing we'll be doing is causing loss of life in one quarter or another. We're trained to kill Hollows, but Shinigami aren't Hollows. And true, I believe that we came into existence because Shinigami failed to keep the Hollow quantities under adequate control and too many people lost their lives. But I also see it from their perspective, too. That this world needs to keep some kind of balance — and we're an obstacle to that balance. I think that, all in all, both sides have been able to put their points clearly. And maybe, in time, the other Quincy clans will come around to the same way of thinking as the Ishida family."

"And perhaps more Shinigami will think my way, instead of simply seeing the Quincy as something in their way." Ametatsu drummed his fingers absently on the ground. "It's a hope I'm holding onto, anyway. It's not easy, coming here with established, high-born entities such as Kuchiki-taichou and Shihouin-taichou, with their elaborate bloodlines and their aristocratic pride burnt into their every act. They have the same exhalted view of their position as some of your Quincy clans have of theirs. And unless one side bends… we could be here for some time."

"That's all right." Niji spread her hands. "We Quincy don't live as long as you Shinigami. We are, after all, human beneath the white uniform. But if it's this lifetime, or the next generation's, it's fine. The conflict has been going on for far too long, anyway. That we're now holding negotiations of any kind is testament to the intentions of Soul Society to end this impasse in a peaceful way. And I support that. I don't like bloodshed. And I don't want to kill Shinigami."

She slipped her hand across to brush his.

"That wasn't what I was trained to do, after all." She murmured. "My

arrows are meant to destroy Hollows. Not pure souls."

"Pure souls, huh." Ametatsu snorted. "If only that were true."

He got to his feet, stretching his arms over his head.

"I need to get back to base." He added. "They'll wonder where I am, and I've already had Kuchiki-taichou warn me about getting to personally involved in human matters. How we're supposed to do anything else and properly judge this situation is beyond me, but there's very little opportunity to argue with members of that particular noble house, so I might as well not waste my breath and just keep as punctual as I can. I do have lesser officers to set an example to, after all."

He held out his hand, pulling Niji to her feet.

"Your father will also wonder." He added. "Whether or not I've sullied your honour by keeping you out here so late without a chaperone."

"I'm not afraid of you." Niji's eyes lit up with laughter. "And I know Father holds out a lot of hope in you too, Ametatsu-san. If anyone is here to hear our side of things, it's you. I believe that. We all do. So don't worry. Our faith in you won't waver. I know you have our best interests at heart. That's why I love you, after all. Even if it's only temporary — even if it's only until you're recalled to Seireitei — I intend on holding on to that as much as I do the fact I believe you'll bring peace between our peoples."

"No pressure, then." Ametatsu said wryly. He met her gaze for a moment, then, gently, he kissed her on the cheek.

"I'll see you tomorrow, no doubt." He murmured. "Tell your father that I'll do my best not to let him down."

"I will." Niji nodded her head. "Goodnight, Ametatsu-san. Keep safe."

With that she loosed her fingers from his hand, slipping across the grass and into the darkening forestland beyond.

For a moment, Ametatsu watched her go. Then he sighed, raising his gaze to the sky which had almost entirely become obscured by the heavy shades of dusk.

"How much longer do we have to do this, Niji?" He whispered. "For the Quincy and the Shinigami — I'll do the job I was put here to do. But for your sake, and your sake alone, I want to stay here. And I want to make things better… I want to live up to that faith you have in me. For there to be peace between our peoples… once and for all."

Author's Note

I don't know whether the Shihouin clan are as tied up with 2-Bantai as they are with the special ops, but it seems possible/probable because of Yoruichi's position there. So for simplicity's sake, I kept it that way.

Kuchiki Ginrei is Byakuya's Grandad. I have a Jigoku-chou fluttering round my head telling me that in the Pendulum chapter either Kyouraku or Ukitake mentioned him as one of the Captains who'd been in post for the past hundred years, along with Unohana. Either way, he's there now.

No idea who was Captain of 10-Bantai. Artistic licence here has now made it this guy, because it's for certain it wasn't Hitsugaya.

Niji means rainbow. It seemed appropriate considering the Bleach rain theme and the story.

Chapter One: Midnight Chimera

Chapter One — Midnight Chimera

It was the same dream again.

Ishida Uryuu rested his hands on the sill of his bedroom window, casting an irritated glance up at the sky overhead. It was an infuriatingly clear night, he mused, with the crescent moon glimmering a faint blue against the blue-black velvet of the heavens. At intervals, bright sparks of white light glittered brightly, breaking up the oppressive monotony of so much darkness, yet to the annoyed Uryuu, it still had a claustrophobic, overbearing feel.

After all, he muttered inwardly to himself, everyone else in Karakura-chou was fast asleep.

Everyone, of course, except him.

He sighed, reaching across to scoop up his glasses, toying with them for a moment before sliding them onto the bridge of his nose. Doing so, he acknowledged, was an admission that the dream had won and that he would not be going back to sleep any time soon, but even so the fuzzy edges of the scenery outside were beginning to jar on his nerves as much as those vivid, incomprehensible scenes that had flooded his brain for the past few nights.

Although the settings were somewhat different each time, Uryuu knew that it was the same dream. The people were the same. The surroundings were the same. Yet no matter how much he tried, he could not make sense of it. It was like watching segments of a movie, he admitted resentfully to himself, but not in the proper order, like chapters of a DVD spliced up and tossed in any old sequence in an attempt to fox the viewer.

He pushed his glasses further up his nose, getting to his feet and padding across his small, unbearably neat bedroom to the door. Across the hall was the bathroom, and he slipped inside, switching on the light and reaching across to turn on the cold tap. With a frown he ran his fingers under the chill water, glad that for that night at least his distant and incomprehensible father had been called to an out of town conference. The two surviving men of the Ishida family had always had a relationship founded on wary suspicion, divided forever, Uryuu suspected, by their difference in attitude to the family's Quincy

heritage. They were like ships in the night most of the time, but Uryuu had never been overly concerned about this state of affairs. In fact, if he was brutally honest, most of the time he neither knew nor cared whether Ryuuken was or was not planning on being home. Likewise, when Uryuu had decided to travel with the others to the world of the dead, Ryuuken had gone about his daily life without even a flicker of worry for his son's whereabouts, and they had not spoken even once about the month long absence.

Well, so much the better. Uryuu knew he had nothing to say to his money-grabbing, overly pragmatic father in any case. If the man wanted to spend the bulk of his life at the hospital he ran, so much to the good.

He leant up against the wall of the bathroom, feeling the cool tiles through the thin fabric of his pyjamas. Outside the window the hoot of an owl made him start, berating himself for his edginess as he cast a lazy gaze through the hazed glass to the black sky beyond. Just as oppressive, just as dark, no matter what angle he looked at it from. It was still the same sky, in the same world that he had chosen to leave a month ago. But he was no longer the same person, and it grated on his pride.

Kurosaki would love this, he reflected, a flicker of resentful frustration stirring inside of him at the thought.

Sure, they had gone to Soul Society, and they had successfully completed their mission. They had prevented the execution of Kuchiki Rukia, exposed insurrection in the ranks and had wound up being hailed as heroes and special guests of the Shinigami who ruled Seireitei with spiritual blades of steel. Yet even so, the whole visit had left him with a bad taste in his mouth. It had been Kurosaki, after all, who had been the real hero. It had been Kurosaki who had optimised his power, defeated Kuchiki Byakuya and opened Seireitei's eyes to the true scale of the scandal. It had been Kurosaki who had returned to the real world with his head held high, the badge of Seireitei at his waist. They had acknowledged him as one of their own.

Not that Uryuu minded that a bunch of Shinigami had not chosen to treat him with the same respect. He was, after all, a Quincy, and such a situation would have made him uncomfortable. It wasn't even that he was annoyed at Kurosaki for his success, although he knew deep down that he would have liked to have been the one who headed off the enemy and clinched the fight. He had gambled on his Quincy pride more than once, and in doing so he had taken down the 12Bantai-Taichou, Kurotsuchi Mayuri with the power of his arrows.

He had more than proven his worth as a fighter.

Yet still, the negativity lingered.

He stretched his hands, glancing at them in derision.

In order to beat Kuchiki Byakuya, Kurosaki had pushed his body to the limits. Yet he had still returned to the real world with his Shinigami powers simmering inside of him, waiting to be called on the next time disaster struck. In contrast, Uryuu had gambled every ounce of his spiritual power — his *reiryoku* — on taking out Kurotsuchi. He had waged everything he had on destroying the man who by his own admission had helped bring about the death of his sensei and grandfather Souken some several years before.

Yet even though he had done so, he had still failed. He had lacked the conviction, in the end, to kill Kurotsuchi, and he had lost his powers in the process. He had returned to the real world a mere shell, he told himself in disgust, raising his gaze to meet his accusing reflection in the bathroom mirror. He could still feel the dangers all around him, but he could no longer fight against them. He was no longer a protector, but something to be protected, and it was that which hurt most of all.

He clenched his fists, controlling the emotions that threatened to well up within him. He had made the choice, and he had taken the gamble. He had known the risks before he had even gone to Soul Society, and he had removed the glove knowing that his body would react in the way it had. That he had failed to kill Kurotsuchi brought him neither pleasure nor distress, but that he had sacrificed his entire life's work for one as twisted and undeserving as the 12Bantai-Taichou angered him more than he could bear.

To find the power to protect something important to him, that was what his Grandfather had taught him. Yet in the end, he had used that power for revenge — an emotion his teacher had considered as futile as running into battle unguarded and unprepared.

And now, these dreams.

Uryuu sighed, glancing at his reflection once more in the mirror. A sallow, pale faced youth stared back, his pinched face and piercing blue eyes making him appear harsher than he was, and the rod-straight dark hair that fell at each side of his face only added to the severity of his appearance. Behind the block-rimmed glasses, his eyes lost some of their intensity, yet gave him a look of bookishness that much of the time stereotyped him into the typical top student category. For many at school, he reasoned, that was exactly what he

was. That his grades came as naturally to him as breathing meant to them that he spent all his free time in the library surrounded by books, but Uryuu knew different. He was smart and school was easy, but perfecting the power gifted him by his lineage had always been his true focus. Now he no longer had that to call on, he felt like he was no longer a whole person.

He did not regret going to Soul Society. He only regretted not understanding before he went the things he understood now.

Slowly he reached across to turn off the light, returning reluctantly to his still-dark bedroom. Somewhere on the horizon he could sense the buzzing activity of a Hollow hunting its prey, and the fighter inside of him longed to slip out and engage it in battle himself, but he knew that it was no use. Within a short space of time he felt the beast's presence fizzle out to nothing, and he sighed heavily, sinking down on his bed.

Kurosaki, without a doubt. Proving yet again that he was the one who had benefited most from going to Soul Society.

"Damn Shinigami." He muttered. "I spend time with them, I fight with them, now I'm dreaming about them. About Shinigami and Quincy… what did I do to myself in Soul Society, anyhow? Would Ojiisan be turning in his grave if he knew I'd gone to such a place? Or would he have been glad? God only knows. Either way, he would've been disappointed in me. I'm disappointed in me. Heck, maybe these damn dreams are sent as punishment for being a fool."

He flopped back against his pillow, closing his eyes. It was already past three am, he knew, and he would have to get up for school in a few hours time. Consecutive nights of broken sleep had not improved his naturally acerbic disposition any, yet he knew that he couldn't talk to anyone about the dreams. They would only laugh at him for taking such a small thing so seriously. They were, after all, just images. Nothing more, nothing less. A hangover from his adventures on the other side. That was all.

Carefully, and without opening his eyes, he removed his glasses, setting them down on the unit as he forced himself to relax.

There was still some time left, after all, for him to get some proper sleep.

"I should never have got involved with Shinigami in the first place." He muttered. "Classmate or not… I should never have got myself into this mess!"

“That was an easy one.”

Kurosaki Ichigo sank down onto the park bench, leaning back against the wood panels and staring absently up at the stars that dotted around over his head. “I just wish the friggin’ things wouldn’t show up in the middle of the damn night, that’s all. I need to sleep too, sometimes, after all. And Rukia ain’t here to help, so I feel like I’m policing this place on my own. Forget Shinigami Rep… I’m more like an unpaid spiritual street cleaner.”

“You complain a hell of a lot, you know, for someone who likes slashing stuff up.” His companion, an identically featured boy of the same height, weight and expression cast him a disparaging look. “Shut the hell up, will you? It wasn’t just your sleep that got disturbed by that Hollow alarm. I was jus’ drifting off to a nice place surrounded by heavenly maidens and the next thing I know it’s screamin’ and you’re bashing me out of one body and into another just to come and listen to you moan. I can only take so much, you know. Just because I happen t’live with you doesn’t mean I’m at your beck and call.”

“You shut up, Kon.” Ichigo grimaced. “We have an arrangement, remember? You take care of my body when I ain’t using it, an’ I put up with having you around. You’re just in a bad mood because Rukia’s not here any more, and that’s a pain to live with, too.”

“Fighting Hollows was more fun when Neesan was here.” Kon grumbled, glancing at Ichigo’s hands. Absently he began picking at the skin along the side of the nails, letting out a heavy sigh. “Neesan was much more graceful about fighting, too. You just swing that great axe around and hope it hits the target. That’s a bunch of shit right there — what if that Hollow had been faster’n that? It could’ve bitten my — your — *our* head right off!”

“I told you already, quit moaning.” Ichigo got to his feet, stretching his arms over his head. “For a start, you look like I’m out on the street mumbling shit to myself in the middle of the night, which is not good in so many ways. An’ second, stop prodding and picking at my hands like that. It’s not nice, watchin’ someone else examine my body like some freak experiment.”

“Are we going home then?” Kon demanded, slowly getting to his feet and brushing the stray leaf litter from Ichigo’s trousers. “Because *you* might not be cold, but the wind’s getting chill. We’ve no more Hollows to worry about tonight, right? We can go back and sleep some — right?”

“*You* can.” Ichigo agreed. “*I’ll* have to be up for school in the

morning. Or I could send you…"

He eyed his companion pensively,

"But you'd just screw around and mess up and that'll be even more of a headache. So I guess it'll be me going an' you staying home. Again."

"Home's no fun if Neesan isn't there." Kon muttered, stamping Ichigo's feet against the ground as if to emphasise his point. "You used to at least pack me into your schoolbag so I could get a look at the view when you were busy doing all that class stuff. Your class has some pretty girls in it — an' if I got the right angle, the view was pretty spectacular. You never do that any more. I bet if Neesan was here, you'd take me to school."

"If Neesan was here." Ichigo mimicked. "You don't ever say anything else, you know that? Rukia stayed in Soul Society to heal her wounds. End of. She's not the same as me. She's from Soul Society. She belongs there and she chose to stop behind. Besides, I think she and Byakuya had shit to talk about, too. An' I don't want to be interfering in any of that hyped up noble Shinigami crap, if you really want the truth. Byakuya may or may not be a decent guy under his fancy hairties and aristocratic cloak, but he looks down his nose at people an' he's not disposed to be friendly to outsiders. Rukia's welcome to have him all to herself — me, I'm glad to be back."

"You went to Soul Society in the first place to bring Neesan back." Kon mumbled.

"No. We went to save her." Ichigo corrected. "I thought then we'd bring her back, sure. But it was her choice. Not ours. Now can it, will you? Else I'll put you back in the lion's body and have Ishida stitch up your mouth so you can't talk at all."

"Why don't you take *him* on your little jaunts with you?" Kon thrust his hands in Ichigo's pockets, casting his black-clad companion a questioning look as they crossed the road that led towards the Kurosaki Hospital. "He likes killing Hollows too, right?"

"Mm." Ichigo frowned, pursing his lips as slowly he shook his head. "No. Not right now. It's tricky, see. It can't work that way."

"Okay, so he hams stuff up and he talks constantly about Quincy pride, but you can deal with that, right?" Kon looked surprised. "Yeesh. You guys are buddies now, ain't you? You went to Soul Society together. You fought together. Don't tell me you've re-opened the divide between Quincy and Shinigami now you're back here?

Because dammit, I'm fed up of being dragged all over town when you want to go kill something. I don't like Hollows — did you get that memo yet? I don't like them at all. And I can just as easily be you fast asleep in bed at home as I can out here in the middle of Karakura-chou looking like an idiot who's ranting out loud to himself."

Ichigo didn't reply to begin with. Then he sighed.

"You're not that stupid, are you?" He demanded. "You're always nagging me about how crap I am at sensing stuff. But if I've noticed, you must've done. Right? Or has being played with by Yuzu broken your *reiatsu* sensors? Ishida lost his powers. He isn't a proper Quincy any more. He can't fight Hollows any more than you can… you moron."

"I don't spend all my time analysing *reiatsu* of guys." Kon said indignantly. "Now Orihime-chan, that'd be a different matter. But I'm not really interested in feeling out Ishida's aura, if it's all the same to you. He's your buddy. Not mine. Nothing to do with me."

"Buddy is a strong word…" Ichigo mused, and Kon snorted.

"You're telling me you're not, then?" He demanded. "Fine. Whatever. Then take him hunting with you and use him as bait or a shield — I don't care."

"Like I'd do that." Ichigo snapped. "But I'm not going to throw the guy into danger for no reason. He's always banging on about his pride. Do you think I want to hear the lecture if we get into a situation and he's made to look like a complete wuss? I'm not as stupid as you think I am — Ishida's fine so long as you keep him off the subject of Quincy honour. And I can just see what he'd say about it, if I started flinging him into the path of creatures he can't take out. He'd like that. Shit, give me some credit, will you?"

"Then why do you take me?" Kon exclaimed. "I'm useless in front of those things, too! I don't fight Hollows — I wasn't designed to do that! Why do you insist on taking me, if you won't take someone like Ishida who's obviously just as useless in that kind of situation!"

"At least you said it. Saves me doing so." Ichigo's lips twitched into a faint smile. "It's obvious isn't it, you idiot? You're in my body. My body I can risk. You're just a tiny little ball of stuff rattling around inside of there. You wouldn't be killed if the Hollow attacked you — not unless he got your core self by some fluke. Your *reiatsu*'s not high. You're not an obvious target for them. You're really a hell of a lot safer than you make out. I'm the one taking the risks — with this body and my real one. Not you. You're just a clothes hanger, that's all.

You're keeping the blood pumping while I'm taking care of business."

"You really think that sounds cool?" Kon glowered at his companion. "Ack, I don't know why I listen to you at all. If Neesan was here…"

"There you go again. If Rukia was here… what? She'd just kick you around too, you know. You've not forgotten that, I bet?"

"Neesan's kicks were special to me." Kon defended himself. "Besides, did it occur to you that when I'm in your body I can feel pain, you reject? Maybe it's difficult for a Hollow to kill me or maybe it's not — but it'd damn well hurt like hell if your theory was ever tested. I don't like Hollows and I don't really like pain, either. You wanna be a Shinigami? S'fine by me. But *I* don't want to be one. So leave me at home next time. All right?"

"Fine." Ichigo sighed. "We're here, anyhow. Unlock the door, Kon. I forgot to leave the window open, so we'll just have to take the stairs and hope everyone's asleep."

"You think I'm your personal servant, don't you?" Kon muttered, sliding his hands into Ichigo's pockets once more and pulling out the small silver key. "I swear, if…"

"Say it one more time and Zangetsu'll be cutting your lion self a brand new pocket." Ichigo threatened, his fingers brushing the hilt of his sword as he did so. "Just shut up and open the door. It's late and I'm tired."

Kon glared at him, pursing his lips, but he made no reply, and as the door swung open the two, Shinigami and companion darted inside and up the stairs, making it safely into Ichigo's bedroom and pulling the door shut behind them.

Within a few minutes the transfer was complete, and Ichigo pulled back the covers of his bed, stretching his limbs before slipping beneath them.

"You know, when you've been bodysitting, it's a hell of a lot easier to switch back than if it's just been lying cold somewhere." He reflected. "You have your uses after all."

"Thanks." Kon's muffled voice came from beneath the bed, and Ichigo grinned, shaking his head.

"G'night, Kon." He said, stifling a yawn and closing his eyes. "Tomorrow night I promise, I'll let you stop home."

“Are you sure you don’t regret not going back with them?”

In the moonlight of the Kuchiki house’s front balcony, two people sat against the stiff stone wall, gazing up at the stars.

To glance at them, it was impossible to imagine two more different people. One, the older of the two was well-muscled and broad, with thick red hair pulled back in a spiky tail and tattoos marking most of his visible skin with slashing black lines. A white bandana was knotted across his brow, emphasising the thuggish element of his appearance, and a sword lay carelessly at his side, glinting occasionally in the moonlight. Across one arm was knotted a thick swathe of fabric adorned with a shield shaped badge, silver and white against the distinctive black of his Shinigami *hakama*. The shield was decorated with the four black strokes that made up the kanji for ‘six’, and below it the distinctive floral insignia that marked him out as Vice Captain of the 6-Bantai, or Sixth Squad.

By contrast his companion was small and slightly built, with big eyes and dark hair that flicked outwards in a slight curl at the name of her neck. She was pretty, her eyes being her most distinctive feature, yet they held a strength and resolution that indicated that beneath her delicate, innocent appearance was someone who knew her own mind. Like her companion, she was robed in the uniform black *hakama*, but hers bore no special adornment, and at her waist there was no sign of her distinctive ice-type *zanpakutou*, Sode no Shirayuki.

From first impressions, it would be hard for an outsider to explain what these two distinctly opposite people might have in common, but for those who knew them, Abarai Renji and Kuchiki Rukia had a long-standing friendship which, even now, the pressures of noble clan rules and political upheaval had failed to destroy.

“What’s to regret?” She asked now, offering her companion a grin. “I’m not from their world, am I? I belong in Soul Society. And now Soul Society doesn’t want to kill me, there’s no reason for me not to rejoin my squad and get back to normal. Is there?”

“Are you real sure about that, Rukia?” Renji cast her a suspicious look. “Did you really choose t’stop behind, or was it somethin’ Kuchiki-taichou ordered you to do, given everything that’s happened?”

“Nii-sama?” Rukia looked startled, then she shook her head. “No. Nii-sama hasn’t said anything about it. We haven’t talked much, to be honest, since he was injured by Ichimaru’s sword. It’s not his decision at all. It’s mine. After all, if I have any hope of getting my powers

back, I have to be here to heal. It's common sense… if I want to be a Shinigami again, and fight with the 13-Bantai like I did before, I need to get my *zanpakutou* back. Right now I don't have that. So I have to stay here."

"I guess that's logical." Renji conceded grudgingly. "Jus' you seemed damn keen on that kid, in the end. You seemed like you enjoyed it — being in their world."

"Keen on him, huh?" Rukia laughed. "I guess so. I guess I trust him with my life — for the obvious reason that I owe it to him. But I don't think that it's the last time I'll see him. He's acknowledged by Soul Society now, after all. He's tied to this place too. It's fine, Renji. I'm patient. I can wait."

She pursed her lips, turning to glance up towards a window above. It was slightly open, curtains fluttering in the light breeze, and she frowned.

"I'm hoping Nii-sama will speak to me at least some more before that." She admitted, muting her tones carefully as she wriggled back into a more comfortable position. "All the things he said when he was injured… I wonder if he meant to say them, or if it was the shock of the pain that made him do it. He's not someone who talks much about things in any case, but even so…"

"Kuchiki-taichou is a tightass, you mean." Renji said easily, folding his arms across his chest. "Heh. Like you have to tell me that. I'm his second in command, remember? I'm well used to his non-communication."

"Keep your voice down. He'll hear you." Rukia warned, holding up her hands as she did so. "Shit, Renji, learn some tact, will you? Just because his room's that far up doesn't mean he doesn't have bat ears. He should be sleeping, true enough, considering he's still under convalescence order from Unohana-taichou. But even so, let's not push it. You got yourself into enough trouble by fighting him. At least don't do anything else to piss him off, okay?"

"I guess." Renji pursed his lips. "Though with the injuries he had it'll be a while before he's weaving Bankai in my face, that's for sure. Hell, Zabimaru and I might even beat him, at this level. I wouldn't worry, Rukia. Taichou's smarter'n that. If he's pissed with me, he won't let it show."

He frowned.

"Besides, truth is I don't think he is." He owned. "It's hard to tell,

because his pissed face an' his not pissed face are generally the same… but I don't think he's angry at me at all for helpin' Ichigo an' the others save you. When we spoke the other day, he didn't seem like he was bearing a grudge. Besides, he beat the shit out of me, so it should be me who's angry, not him."

He glanced at his hands.

"I still got a long way to go before I can fight him on equal grounds."

"Nii-sama isn't someone you should be fighting." Rukia scolded. "Soul Society's focus is on Aizen and those bastards who followed him into Hueco Mundo. If you start private vendettas among yourselves then what the hell use are any of us going to be when that battle begins? Use some common sense, Renji. You have got a little, at the very least."

"Ah, shut up." Renji grimaced at her. "You know what I mean. An' it's not bad for a Vice to want to best his Captain. Only natural, after all, to want to progress."

He tilted his head on one side.

"You seem damn fond of him all of a sudden, considerin' this is the guy you told me had never acknowledged you as anythin' more than there in forty years." He added. "Why the change of heart? Jus' because he took a blade for you doesn't change the fact his personality's so far up his ass it's hard t'know what he really thinks about shit."

Rukia paused for a moment, glancing up once more at the open window.

"I guess I want to be fond of him." She admitted, looking awkward. "Shit, maybe I did spend too long in the real world after all. But Ichigo's family are real close-knit, and I never really had that. Besides, it kind of dawned on me, when he told me about his wife. I never thought of it before. Even though I look like her — even though he originally told me he adopted me because I looked like her — it must be difficult to see me and know I'm not her. She's dead, and he can't get her back. And he fought his whole family to have her, but he only had her for five years. He's had me for forty, and fought his family over that, too… yet no matter how much he does for me, it can't turn back time and bring my sister back. So I think… I can deal with him being like he is. Even if that is all he is. Because in the end, it sucks for him, too."

“Shit, you have got soft.” Renji snorted. “Maybe it’s a good thing you ain’t gone back to the real world with that kid and his buddies. Taichou doesn’t need anyone to worry about him, Rukia. He can worry about himself. That’s the kind of bastard he is — his aristocratic blood’ll keep him going, no matter what else happens.”

He grinned, reaching out to slap her across the shoulders.

“We’re Rukongai kids, an’ that’s different.” He added. “We scrambled up together, an’ all that shit. Taichou might be a kick-ass fighter, but he’s never seen or done the shit we have. An’ I’m glad he adopted you, because I’m glad you got someplace to belong. But one day I’ll still get one over on him. Cos kids from Rukongai ain’t quitters, an’ we see things through. I’m not goin’ to be bested by someone who’s had everythin’ given to him since the day he was born… you watch. Eventually I’ll do it. Eventually I’ll beat him.”

“You really are serious about it, aren’t you?” Rukia rolled her eyes skywards. “So you aren’t going to quit as his Vice, then? You’re goin’ to stick it out? Because 6-Bantai has always belonged to the Kuchiki-ke. You’re mad if you think that’ll change.”

“Past an’ future ain’t necessarily always the same. 2-Bantai ain’t so tied up with the Shihouin family now, after all.” Renji objected. “Besides, it ain’t what I meant. I don’t want 6-Bantai. I wanna beat Kuchiki-taichou good an’ proper, that’s all. He’s my target. I’m still aiming for it — and I mean to get there.”

“Even though there are three vacant captaincy positions now?” Rukia asked, and Renji shrugged.

“Noone’s asked me t’be a Captain, an’ I ain’t looking for it right yet.” He responded casually. “There’re other people, an’ if being a Captain means always stickin’ to the rules, I ain’t sure it’s for me.”

“You have Bankai, though. Not many people who aren’t already captains have mastered that.” Rukia pointed out.

“Mm.” Renji looked pensive. “But, though I hate t’admit it, Taichou is right. I ain’t got enough control over it yet to call myself ready. I can fight with it, but I need t’work at it some more before I’m at that level. I’ll nail it, but for the time being, I’ll stick to where I am.”

He cast her a grin.

“An’ you’ll be back in 13-Bantai, doin’ the chores as usual.” He teased.

“Shut up.” Rukia swiped at him playfully. “It won’t be like that.

Ukitake-taichou isn't that kind of captain."

She sighed, tapping her feet idly against the wood panels.

"I wonder what Ichigo and the others are doing, now they're home." She reflected absently. "Whether they can really go back to a normal life after having spent a month in Soul Society? Nii-sama said one cryptic thing about Ichigo's Bankai lacking control the other day, and I can't work it out. It just makes me wonder… can anyone ever go back to how things were before after an experience like that?"

Author's Note:

I haven't a clue if Ryuuken and Uryuu actually live together or not, to be honest. But for the purpose of this story, they do.

Does Kon annoy anyone else? :S

And Renji and Rukia. I'm sorry. They're too cute for me to ignore.

Chapter Two: Normality

Chapter Two: Normality

“Iiiiichhhigoooooooooooooo!”

As he opened the door of the classroom, a tremendous shriek pierced the air and Ichigo cursed, ducking back behind the hard wooden divide just in time. There was a sickening bang as his classmate’s body clattered against the barrier, followed by a groan and a thud, and cautiously Ichigo inched the door back, peering around it with an irritated look on his face.

“Keigo, what the hell’s up with you this morning!”

“What kind of greeting is that?” Asano Keigo picked himself up, dusting his body down as he glared at his friend indignantly. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you? You just like to pick on me, these days.”

“These days?” Ichigo raised an eyebrow, stepping into the room properly. “I’ve always done that — haven’t you noticed?”

“You’re so cruel.” Keigo sighed, resignation on his plain features. “But I’m not going to let you get to me. Mizuiiro’s friend gave him a bunch of tickets to a rock concert in the park Friday night, and I thought, why not ask Ichigo? Since we’re pals, and all.”

“Friday?” Ichigo paused, looking startled. “This Friday?”

“Yeah. The day after Thursday and before Saturday.” Keigo nodded impatiently. “Well? There’re bound to be pretty girls there, and we haven’t done anything for ages like this, since *someone* was skipping off all summer doing God knows what in secret.”

At this juncture he paused, sending his friend an accusing glance.

“I swear, if I find out women were involved…”

“Friday, huh?” Ichigo cut across him, shrugging his shoulders. “Sure. Don’t see why not. I ain’t busy.”

“Then you’re coming?” Keigo’s eyes lit up, and Ichigo pushed him away with a careless shove.

“Don’t look at me like that. It scares me… yeesh.”

“But you’re gonna come? We’re goin’ to hang out like normal

friends and do normal high school guy stuff?”

“You’re really pathetic sometimes, you know that, Keigo?” Ichigo sighed, rubbing his temples. “Sure. Whatever. I told you, I ain’t busy. Okay?”

“You’re not going to invite Ishida or anything stupid like that, are you?” Keigo dropped his tone, casting his glance across the classroom towards where the year’s top student was sat primly at his desk, going meticulously through his books. At first glance he seemed completely engrossed in what he was doing, but Ichigo’s brows drew together as he interpreted the tension in the other boy’s slender frame. He shook his head.

“Why would I do that?” He asked frankly. “I can’t see Ishida at a rock concert… can you?”

“Thank God for that.” Keigo looked relieved. “You’ve been so weird and buddy-buddy with him since the summer, I wondered.”

“Buddy buddy, huh.” Ichigo pursed his lips, then shrugged. “Not especially.”

“That’s how it seems.” Keigo pouted. “What with that and your finishing 23rd on the last semester tests I thought you were joining the nerd club for sure.”

“I can’t help being smarter’n you, Keigo.” Ichigo said crushingly. “Get over it already, will you? You don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“Then tell me.” Keigo retorted. “I’m fed up with being out of the loop, you know. You never tell me anything these days.”

“Oh, stop being an idiot.” Ichigo shook his head. “You sound like a whining schoolgirl.”

“I do not!”

“Do so.” Ichigo folded his arms across his chest. “Hey, are you inviting Chad to this thing, too? Or are you leaving *him* ‘out of the loop’?”

“I already asked him. He already said he’d come.” Keigo returned neatly. “It’s just *you* who’s weird and doesn’t give straight answers these days.”

His eyes widened.

“Hey, Ichigo, did you get in with like, a gang or something over the summer? Is that it? Is that why you never hang out with us any

more?”

“A gang?” Ichigo’s eyes widened, then he laughed. “Give me a break, will you? Of course not.”

“Well, I still don’t get it.” Keigo frowned. “You’re weird as hell lately. You keep having cryptic conversations about fighting or some shit an’ you’ve skipped out of classes a bunch of times since we came back after the break. We’ve been friends ages, haven’t we? Why do you keep leaving me out — it’s mean! If you’ve found somewhere new and cool t’hang out, at least share it with your buddies, dammit!”

“It’s nothing to do with you, is all.” Ichigo shrugged. “Let me know what time you wanna meet up on Friday. All right?”

With that he slipped past his friend, dropping his bag down against his desk as he sank down into his seat. As he did so, his gaze automatically shifted to his right, where the empty desk once inhabited by Rukia stood. She had gone back in more ways than one, he reflected ruefully. Noone but the people who had gone to Soul Society remembered that a girl called Kuchiki Rukia had ever been a part of the class, and yet Ichigo knew that even if they never met again, he wouldn’t forget the acquaintance as long as he lived. In one brief moment she had changed his life forever, and the more he had considered that point, the more grateful he had been,

“Good morning, Kurosaki-kun.” A voice startled him out of his reverie and he glanced up sheepishly, meeting the questioning gaze of Inoue Orihime.

“Inoue… good morning.”

“Are you all right?” Orihime looked concerned. ‘You were staring off into space and your brow was all scrunched up like this,’ She demonstrated, twisting her pretty features into a surreal grimace. “More than usual — is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong.” Ichigo shook his head, offering her a rueful grin. “I was just thinking about Rukia having gone back to her world and how it’s quiet without her.”

He stifled a yawn.

“Plus I need a proper night’s sleep.” He added dryly. “Without her, there’s only me to fight the… you know. And trailing round the town with a moaning Kon for company is a pain in the ass.”

“I thought I sensed one last night.” Orihime admitted. “Then it disappeared. Was that you, Kurosaki-kun?”

“Of course.” Ichigo nodded. “It’s my job, isn’t it? Even if I’m not being paid — I promised I’d protect this place and I am.”

He pulled a face.

“I just wish they’d not kick off when I’m asleep.”

“It’s a lot of pressure, huh.” Orihime looked sympathetic. “Well, you know, you can always wake me up and I’ll come help you. I’m getting stronger and I could do it, Kurosaki-kun. If you wanted me to. After all…”

“It’s all right.” Ichigo held up his hands. “I appreciate it, but I can handle them. It’s just a pain, that’s all. Nothin’ you should worry about. These ain’t even registering on the fighting scale — one slash of the sword and they’re gone. I’d be pretty pathetic if I couldn’t do it on my own.”

“All right.” Orihime shrugged in her usual happy-go-lucky way. “But if you need help, Kurosaki-kun, you can count on me.”

“Thanks, Inoue.” Ichigo smiled, his gaze flitting once more across the classroom to where Uryuu was sitting. He had not made eye-contact, but something about his posture had stiffened, and Ichigo narrowed his eyes, realising that his classmate had probably heard most of the exchange.

“Dammit.” He muttered to himself, as Orihime headed to her own seat. “That was tactless. Last thing I want to do is set him off on a tangent. But shit, it’s hard to remember… if he hadn’t been such a damn idiot, this wouldn’t have happened. He’s been strange since we came back from Soul Society, and he was pretty strange to begin with. But I don’t have a clue what goes through that guy’s head.”

He glanced at his books for a moment, then sighed, getting to his feet and sauntering across the classroom, sliding his hands casually into his pockets as he did so.

“Yo, Ishida.” He said evenly, and the Quincy glanced up, eying him quizzically from behind his glasses.

“Kurosaki.” He said coolly. “What’s up? You look like something pounded your soul about a bit last night.”

His words were pointed, as he extended a thin finger, pushing the glasses further up his nose to emphasise his point.

“Don’t tell me that they’re getting too much for you, these Shinigami responsibilities.”

“What’s eating you?” Ichigo ignored the barb, dropping his hands down on his companion’s desk and meeting his gaze square on. “You were listening to Inoue and I talking just then, weren’t you? Sounds to me like you’re the one who has a problem, not me.”

“Class is about to begin, Kurosaki.” Uryuu said evenly, picking up his books and neatening them for the third time. “You should sit down, before Sensei comes and shouts at you to do so.”

“You’re really weird sometimes, you know that?” Kurosaki stood back, letting out a sigh of frustration. “Fine. Whatever. But if y’ask me, you look like you took a pounding last night too. I was out at something like three o’ clock doing my job, which I’m sure you know damn well. But there’s no way you were hunting *those things* last night, right? So why do you look like you haven’t slept in about a week?”

“Perhaps it was because I care about my grades.” Uryuu suggested coolly. “Maybe I was catching up on all the work that I missed when I was traipsing around *that place* with you over the summer.”

“That was summer break, Ishida.”

“Yes, and we had assignments.” Uryuu bristled. “*Some* of us have a top of the class position to protect.”

“Some of us have an ego to massage, more like.” Ichigo muttered. “Fine, have it your way. I thought after the summer we’d got past this stage, but if you’re too much a coward to own up to whatever it is, fine. I’ll go sit down and forget about it.”

With that he turned on his heel, returning to his seat. As he dropped bad-temperedly into it, he was aware of Uryuu’s gaze boring into his back, and he frowned, inwardly cursing in as many expletive terms as he could.

Uryuu had definitely lost his Quincy powers, but even now he wasn’t willing to talk about it.

Urahara-san might know a way for him to get them back, considering all the crazy shit he knows, but if the guy won’t talk about it, what the hell can we do? He’s such a pain in the ass.

Ichigo rested his chin in his hands, contemplating. Even though they had won the fight in Soul Society, he knew the situation remained unfinished. Aizen and his companions had still escaped to Hueco Mundo, and there would no doubt be another battle before the year was out.

Ichigo knew he had strength, even if the levels of it sometimes scared him. But, little as he liked to admit it, he knew that he could not fight the threat of invading Hollows or former Shinigami captains on his own. And by being obstinately silent on the subject, Ichigo was sure that Uryuu was potentially putting them at a disadvantage. Of all his Earthly companions, Uryuu had the keenest senses, and, himself aside, had had the most battle potential. He had taken down a captain too, after all, Ichigo remembered. Even though it had cost him everything he had.

"But he goes and loses it like a careless school kid with his dinner money." He muttered. "Shit, if Aizen came back, what then? Soul Society aren't gonna leave me out of things now I have this badge. An' if this place gets involved too… we're goin' to need as many people who can fight as possible. Damn you, Ishida! At least admit you can't do things! We can't find a solution if you won't own up to the problem in the first place!"

He pursed his lips, inwardly making up his mind to take a trip to see the enigmatic storekeeper Urahara after school.

"Maybe he'll know something I don't." He reflected. "And he's sneaky. Maybe *he* can sneak 'round Ishida's obstinacy an' kick sense into him somehow."

So things were progressing just as the Captain had expected.

In the silence of the laboratory, deep within the core of the 12-Bantai territory, a sole figure sat hunched in front of a computer screen, her gaze never leaving it for even the briefest moment as strings of data blipped and danced across the monitor's smooth surface. It was late, and most of Soul Society were asleep, but she was far from tired. More, her every sense was focused on the task at hand, conscious only of the fact that it was Mayuri-sama's orders and that she must not disobey them.

"Well?"

The door at the back of the laboratory slid back with a soft hiss, and the girl was aware of footsteps crossing the smooth tiled floor towards her.

"Do you have the data, Nemu?"

"Yes, Mayuri-sama." Without even looking up from the screen, the young girl nodded her head. "It's exactly as you predicted. Your experiment seems to be a success."

“Of course it’s a success, you stupid girl.” Her companion brought his hand sharply down across the back of her head and she tumbled backwards from the force of the blow, slipping off her chair with a clatter to the floor below.

“How many years have I spent testing and refining the spirit particles in this area of Seireitei? Long enough for even your stupid brain to absorb.”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama. I am sorry.” Nemu picked herself up from where she had fallen, re-taking her seat without a moment of hesitation.

“I’ve really been remarkably fortunate, in things taking this turn.” The captain turned his attention back to the screen, leaning over the screen as he examined the dots and lines for himself.

A slow smile touched his features.

“Well, well. How interesting.” he murmured, pursing his lips. “This is just as I hoped. After all this time, too. I thought I’d exhausted all the possibilities when it came to examining the Quincy, but it seems I misjudged the predictability of their race. His appearance was opportune, just when I needed someone to test my latest experiment on. In the end, our confrontation was more perfectly timed and placed than even I could have anticipated.”

He squinted more closely at the screen.

“It appears this Quincy boy is a fascinating subject matter, without a doubt. I think that we might get some unique data from this subject, Nemu.”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu agreed.

“Do you realise the possibilities that this might create?” The Captain cast her a glance. “With so many things stored in dusty archives in the Kuchiki-ke estate, there are far too many records beyond easy reach. Yet this way we might find out the truth about things we’ve never before been able to analyse. If my preliminary tests have been anything to go by, this could be the start of something incredible. Even if the Quincy proves to be a waste of my time, there are so many more options. He is exactly what I need, now. A shell within which I can manipulate the most sophisticated of test material.”

He tut-tutted under his breath.

“If only it wasn’t so difficult to get volunteer test subjects in this

place." He murmured. "Dragging in souls from Rukongai is always a hassle, and then there's the red tape of concealing their feeble reiatsu when someone's ordered a random inspection. Since Urahara was exiled, they've insisted on keeping tabs on the tests I run, and I've done too much work to let it all go to waste because of carelessness. Still, it's been such a pain. You aside, Nemu, I haven't had a living subject to tinker with for a long, long while."

"The Quincy lost his powers in the battle with you, Mayuri-sama." Nemu said softly. "Do you believe he can get them back?"

"I don't know, yet." Her companion pursed his lips. "Don't ask stupid questions. I'm still working on many, many possibilities. Besides, that's not the focus of my experiment. I don't care whether that child can or can't fire another bow. I have a more sophisticated use for him — we'll just have to wait and see whether a living human subject is as susceptible as I think he will be to sensitive quantities of spiritual reiatsu."

He glanced at the screen.

"Enough with this. I want to run a different scan now."

"Yes, Mayuri-sama." Nemu reached across to touch the control panel. "What would you have me do with the data?"

"File it and open a new session." The other man instructed. "At this stage I'm merely gathering information, after all. It will be interesting to see if my hypothesis is correct… I don't see any reason why it shouldn't be, but I won't know for sure until the preliminary stages are past."

He stood back, folding his arms in satisfaction across his chest.

"It was fortunate indeed to meet him in combat at such a critical time." He reflected. "I was just beginning to get bored with simply theorising, after all."

He cast Nemu a glance.

"You can go." He said dismissively. "I will review the information myself from hereon in, Nemu."

"Yes, Mayuri-sama." Nemu got obediently to her feet, turning and bowing her head respectfully towards her captain. Then, without a moment of hesitation, she turned on her heel, making her way towards the exit of the laboratory. As the door hissed open, she stepped out into the hallway, turning towards the stairs that led back up to the main offices of 12-Bantai.

She did not look back. Mayuri-sama's work was his business, and she had no right to question any of it, after all. As Vice Captain of 12-Bantai, and more, as Kurotsuchi Mayuri's lab-created daughter, she existed only to follow his instructions and bear his criticisms without complaint.

Even so, however, as she reached her quarters, a faint flicker of regret stirred inside of her slim frame as she remembered the fierce battle between her Captain and master and the young Quincy boy who had fought with such conviction and fervour. It had been a long, drawn out affair, in which Mayuri-sama's abilities had been stretched to their limits, she knew that. She had observed and recorded the whole matter in her memory to be studied and picked over by the scientist at a later date, so even though she had been badly hurt by the conflict, she had not lost her focus for even the briefest of moments. Mayuri-sama had been taken off guard many times by the high level of the boy's power and his steely resolution, and yet, as usual, the 12-Bantai Captain had managed to turn a humiliating defeat into the beginnings of a brand new scientific examination.

Nemu closed her eyes, recalling the final scenes of the fight in vivid, minute detail as, in her mind's eye, the boy had removed his glove, firing an arrow of immense proportions into her Captain's battered body. He had been angry — his entire aura glittering with rage at the things Mayuri-sama had said and shown to him. Yet despite that fact, and even with the huge wave of Quincy power at his disposal, he had not fired to kill.

Nemu had been Mayuri-sama's servant since her creation, and despite her subservience, she was not stupid. She had known the moment the arrow had been loosed that it was not a fatal shot, and that even if it made contact with her Captain's body, he would not be killed. And for this stroke of mercy, she had felt grateful.

Without Mayuri-sama, after all, she had no purpose in existing at all. Even though he was cruel to her, it was the only life she had ever known. She had no desire to lose the person who, despite everything, was the centre of her universe.

Mayuri-sama had recovered his strength enough to focus on his experiments once more, and Nemu had known that the Quincy boy who had dealt him such a drastic defeat would be at the top of the list. Nemu too had picked up on the high level spirit particles in the atmosphere surrounding the site of battle, and she had anticipated her Captain's orders even before he had given them.

Monitor the Quincy, and report back on his progress.

For that reason she had given the boy the poison antidote and spared his life. For Mayuri-sama's sake, she had countered Ashisogi Jizou's toxins and preserved the boy as a potential specimen for future research. She had known, even as she had given him the solution, that it was teeming with bacteria which would monitor every single move and action the boy made from that moment on, and that she was in some way consigning him to being Mayuri-sama's test subject for the rest of time.

For this fact, she had felt a slight amount of guilt. Yet she had not wanted to let the boy die, even so. He had shown her kindness, and she had reasoned from her own experiences that living as Mayuri-sama's project was better than dropping into complete oblivion.

She only hoped that whatever her enigmatic captain had in mind, it would not cause the Quincy boy too much suffering. Mayuri-sama had been excited by the possibilities as soon as he had begun reviewing Nemu's read-outs, and Nemu had fleetingly wondered whether or not her decision had been the right one.

Still, it was done now. And she would obey Mayuri-sama's commands, no matter what form they took. That was why she was there, after all. To do her Captain's bidding, whatever the cost.

She pushed back the door of her quarters, stepping into the plain sleeping chamber and dropping down on the bed.

The Quincy was back in his world, now, she reflected, stretching out on her bed. It was quite possible that the distance between him and Mayuri-sama would render the nature of experimentation one done through remote means. Either way, it was too late to change things now. In firing his arrow the last time, the Quincy had absorbed enough spirit particles to spark Mayuri-sama's investigative instinct. And Nemu knew only too well what kind of particles drifted around that particular section of Seireitei. Of all the places to have engaged the 12-Bantai Captain in battle, the Quincy had unwittingly chosen the site of a long-dead experiment… and had accidentally breathed new life into what had seemed like a closed study.

She closed her eyes once more.

It was out of her hands now, after all. All she could do was the job she had been given, and that was all. The Quincy would have to find his own way to fight back, if such a way existed. And if not, so be it. Mayuri-sama's wishes could not be ignored, and she would not defy him, not even to warn the boy of the trap he had stepped so easily into.

It was not her place to interfere.

Author's Note

OMG Keigo is a friggin' headcase :S

And don't get me started on Kurotsuchi (shivers) I can't believe I actually wrote him into this story :S

Chapter Three: The Mirror Of Blood

Chapter Three: The Mirror Of Blood

The Urahara-Shouten stood in a nondescript section of Karakura-chou, at the furthest end of a deserted series of streets and alleys which, if someone stopped to consider it, leant themselves to the suggestion that they were designed to keep people away. There were no distinct signs or arrows indicating that any kind of establishment even existed in that part of the city, yet somehow the Shouten managed to eke a living and as Ichigo made his way through the narrow walkways, he allowed himself a rueful grimace, thrusting his hands in his pockets as he contemplated the kind of man he was about to go and consult.

Ichigo had never quite established in his own mind just what kind of shop it was that Urahara Kisuke, the enigmatic former Captain of 12-Bantai had chosen to run in that remote corner of Karakura. Though it stocked many things that would not be amiss in a normal high street store, beneath the innocent looking building was a huge basement custom designed by the owner as a battle training centre, and in the rooms beyond the public's immediate view were items which Ichigo was certain had never been licenced for sale anywhere in the real world.

Possibly not even in Soul Society either, he reflected absently, remembering the way in which he had come to acquire Kon.

Even now he knew that there was much he didn't know about the man who had trained him and helped him regain his Shinigami powers. From Urahara's own mouth he had heard next to nothing at all, as it had been the man's oldest friend Shihouin Yoruichi who had briefly filled him in on the shop-owner's Soul Society past. As a former Captain, Ichigo knew from his own experience that Urahara was strong and skilled with his sword, Benihime. Yet for the most part he seemed to prefer to keep a low profile, existing in the shadows and keeping his true motives close to his chest.

Even despite that fact, however, Ichigo had come to consider him an ally.

As he stepped onto the front forecourt, he paused, casting a glance up at the shop pensively. A young girl was sweeping the front step, her dark hair in two tails that bounced as she worked, but it did not

seem like the establishment had any customers, and Ichigo racked his brains, trying to remember if he had ever seen anyone other than his coterie come to the shop at all.

“Kurosaki-san!”

At the sight of him, the young girl set aside her broom, bowing her head towards him. “Welcome to the Urahara Shouten. How can I help?”

“Yo, Ururu.” Ichigo strode across the dusty ground towards her, raising his hand in a warm greeting. “The owner here?”

“Yes.” Ururu looked surprised. “He’s inside. Do you want me to go and get him for you?”

“If you don’t mind.” Ichigo nodded. “I have something I want to ask him. About Soul Society an’ shit.”

“Soul Society?” Ururu’s eyes widened, then she nodded her head. “All right. Please wait for a moment. I’ll go tell him that you’re here.”

With that she disappeared into the store, and Ichigo leant up against the wall, dropping his school bag down onto the ground as he gazed up at the hazy blue sky overhead. It was the same colour as the sky in Soul Society, he reflected, absently wondering what Rukia might be doing now. Was she healing? He hoped so. Deep down he still held himself responsible for her slow recovery, though he knew that it was as much Urahara’s fault as it was his own. Still, though life in Karakura had carried on as normally as was possible under the circumstances, he knew that he missed hunting Hollows as a team.

“Kon’s a whiner, after all.” He muttered, kicking at a stray stone on the ground. “But that’s how it is, so that’s that.”

“Kurosaki-san!”

A voice startled him back to himself at that moment and he swung around to see the shop owner sauntering across the ground towards him, a wide smile on his face.
Ichigo had no idea how old Urahara was in actuality, but in appearance the shop owner was probably in his middle to late thirties, straggly blond hair straying out beneath the heavy brim of a green and white striped hat. He was garbed in a loose outfit with a flapping over-jacket that Ichigo wryly mused was probably a reminder of his days as a Gotei captain, although try as he might he could not picture Urahara in the black *hakama* and white *haori* of a Shinigami squad leader. Despite the fact that their training fights had proved Urahara’s reiatsu to be of a superior level, Ichigo had never been able to sense

his mentor's approach, and this only added to the sense of mystery surrounding him.

He paused a foot or so away from Ichigo, peering at him curiously from beneath the brim of his hat.

"Well, and I didn't expect a visitor today! Isn't the weather too nice to spend running errands, Kurosaki-san?"

"I'm not running an errand." Ichigo shook his head. "I've come to speak to you. I want to ask you about something — if you know the answer."

"Very cryptic." A smile twitched at Urahara's lips, and he nodded, reaching out to touch Ichigo's shoulders. "You've come straight here from school, have you? It makes a change to see you with a bag on your shoulder instead of a sword."

"My bag's on the ground."

"Yes, but it wasn't when you arrived here." Urahara eyed him fondly, almost in the same way a scientist might regard his favourite lab pet, Ichigo decided, and his brow furrowed.

"You saw me arrive?"

"Kurosaki-san, your reiatsu sends out a beacon for miles around. I knew you were heading here when you left school." Urahara laughed, clapping his hand down more firmly on the boy's shoulder and causing him to wince. "Well? What's on your mind? I have to admit that I didn't expect to be seeing you again so soon. Surely your adventures over the summer were enough for one school year? At least, there's no chance of any activity from Aizen or the Hougyoku yet. You're quite at liberty to take a break from training, even if it's just a short one. Studies are important too, you know, even for a Shinigami Substitute!"

"I know." Ichigo wriggled out of the man's grasp, meeting his gaze head on. "But it's still sort of why I'm here."

"I see." Urahara's eyes narrowed, and he took a step back, eying his companion thoughtfully. "Something's concerning you? About your fighting experiences, maybe? Your technique, perhaps…?"

"No." Ichigo shook his head, forcing the thought of his battle with Byakuya out of his mind. "Not me. It's Ishida."

"Ishida-san, is it?" Urahara pursed his lips. "What about Ishida-san? I haven't seen him since I dropped him off at home after you returned here. If you're thinking…"

“He’s lost his powers, hasn’t he?” Ichigo cut across, and Urahara paused, gazing at him for a moment. He smiled.

“Well, so you’re improving at sensing reiatsu.” He observed. “You’re making me proud of you, Kurosaki-san — that you’ve paid attention and taken note of things you’ve been told!”

“That’s not important.” Ichigo said impatiently. “What about Ishida’s Quincy powers? There’s a way to get them back, right? I mean, he can’t have lost them for good — can he?”

“Ah.” Urahara put his finger to his nose. “That’s something I can’t help you with. I’m not a Quincy, after all.”

“You’re hardly a Shinigami, stuck here like this, but you still know a fair bit of shit about what goes on in Soul Society.” Ichigo objected. “You must know something about Ishida’s people too — right? You told Rukia their story, and all of that. You know who they are.”

“Yes.” Urahara agreed. “And you’re right. I’m *not* a Shinigami — not like this. But you’re confusing my knowledge with experience, Kurosaki-san. You’re mistaken.”

He shook his head, gesturing for Ichigo to follow him inside, and they walked through the main shop to one of the small, basically furnished back rooms. Urahara sat down, indicating for Ichigo to follow suit, and after a moment of hesitation Ichigo did so, eying the shop owner in irritation.

“Well?” He demanded. “If you don’t know anything, why’ve we come back here so noone walks past and hears us?”

“You’re getting quicker witted all the time, it seems.” Urahara mused, amusement flickering in his pale eyes. “No, it isn’t what you think. I know that since you went to Soul Society, you’ve learnt bits and pieces of my past, and I won’t dispute that I know a lot about Soul Society because of my experiences there. Yoruichi-san made it clear to me what she’d told you, and of course, the matter of the Hougyoku…”

He paused, shrugging his shoulders.

“That’s a whole other story.” He admitted. “But in terms of the Quincy… I knew the story of the extermination, but I wasn’t in any position to hear about it first hand. I know the little I do because I was associated with Yoruichi-san’s family and the Shihouin clan were always in summary charge of 2-Bantai when I was living in Soul Society. Not only that, but other aspects of Shinigami authority have been their, shall we say, jurisdiction. The actual eradication of the Quincy happened a good hundred years or so before I became captain

of 12-Bantai. And I was only Captain for a brief heartbeat. It was a short and not entirely sweet experience… during which I doubt I gleaned information that has any correlation to young Ishida-san and his situation."

He tilted his head on his side, and Ichigo knew he was assessing him closely.

"You've come, but he hasn't." He added. "This is without his knowledge, then?"

"He hasn't even told me he's lost them." Ichigo admitted. "But it's pissing me off, the way he's acting. And if we're going to wind up fighting Aizen, we're going to need his power as much as mine. When I lost mine, Urahara-san, you beat it back into me. When Byakuya cut my Shinigami power away, you managed to bring it back. I thought…"

"That the same thing might apply if it was tried on Ishida-san?" Urahara raised an eyebrow, and Ichigo nodded.

"It crossed my mind." He admitted.

"But the Quincy are living people." Urahara chided gently. "Shinigami are souls, divided from their former bodies. They have physical form, but they exist in a different way from people who inhabit this world. You are an exception, because you're a Shinigami yet still alive in this world. What we did with you could have resulted in your death, your Hollowfication, or any number of outcomes. It was a case of desperate times and desperate measures… to revive your Shinigami powers, you had to be brought close to death and complete separation between your soul and your body. More to the point, the power you were wielding in the first instance wasn't your own, but that which Kuchiki-san gave you. What we did is stir up your own Shinigami abilities, which weren't affected in the fight with Abarai-san and his superior officer."

"Well, sure, but still…"

"Ishida-san is different." Urahara shook his head. "He's never needed to be separated from his body in order to use his spiritual power. And to do any kind of experiment of that nature on him would probably prove fatal. Ishida-san's soul is a chained soul, after all. He can't do what you can do. He's not designed that way."

"So you really don't know a way to bring his powers back?" Ichigo frowned, and Urahara shrugged.

"I don't." He said frankly. "Though I'm sure I'd have a lot of fun

trying, I don't think Ishida-san would appreciate it. And he's not asked for help, so I wouldn't feel right imposing it on him. Besides, there are others who know more about the Quincy than I do, I'm sure. And if there is a way to return his powers, they'll know more easily than me what to do."

"What kind of people?" Ichigo jerked his head up. "Someone you know?"

"You jump to conclusions so quickly." Urahara scolded. "It's not for us to get involved in. The Quincy are a proud race. Let them settle things among themselves."

"But Ishida is the last Quincy… isn't he?" Ichigo looked confused. Urahara shrugged.

"It's a big world." He said vaguely. "Maybe, maybe not. It's hard to tell."

"You do know more than you're telling me!"

"Perhaps, perhaps not." Urahara spread his hands, smiling. "But either way, I'm sure it's nothing you should worry about, Kurosaki-san. Ishida-san returned here with his life, if not his Quincy powers. He's not spiritually dead, since he still has the ability to sense others' reiatsu. I'm sure that in time everything will be all right."

"I hope you're right." Ichigo muttered. "Because much as I hate to admit it, I think we're gonna need him. And he's been so damn weird lately. Inoue said he wouldn't want to talk about it, so I ain't asked him direct or anything. But he's being a pain in the butt and it's annoying the hell out of me. Plus he looks like he ain't slept since we left Soul Society."

"You look somewhat tired yourself." Urahara reflected, and Ichigo shrugged.

"I'm Hollow hunting most nights." He admitted. "Ishida ain't doing that, so God knows what his deal is."

"You're asking the wrong person." Urahara said lightly. "I'm honoured that you think I'm such a fountain of knowledge, Kurosaki-san, but I can't read other people's minds."

"You really don't know anything about the Quincy?" Ichigo eyed him suspiciously, and Urahara spread his hands.

"As much as anyone else who's ever been assigned to 2-Bantai." He said casually. "After the core of them were wiped out, those that were left were kept under close observation by the Shinigami in that squad.

I operated with 2-Bantai for quite a while, in one way or another. So I saw them, briefly and sometimes was dispatched to check up on them… but more than that, I don't know. I had other more pressing responsibilities and Yoruichi-san didn't seem to want to send me to the real world more than she had to."

He shrugged.

"Perhaps she thought I might get into mischief, let out on my own like that." He reflected pensively. "Who knows for sure."

"*Yoruichi*-san?" Ichigo blinked, and Urahara offered him a nonchalant smile.

"Of course." He agreed blithely. "She was Captain of 2-Bantai — didn't you know that?"

"Hang on a minute… *she* was a Captain, too?" Ichigo stared, and Urahara laughed.

"So she told you all about *my* past, but not so much her own?" He reflected, tut-tutting under his breath. "That's so like her. I hope she won't be angry at me, but there's no reason not to tell you. Yes, she was Captain of 2-Bantai at one point, when I was still just a seated officer. She gave me my recommendation, in fact…"

A nostalgic look crossed his face.

"But that was then and this is now. It's been a long time."

"So what did *she* do to get kicked out, then?" Ichigo pursed his lips, and Urahara shook his head.

"Nothing." He said airily. "She just decided to come with me, instead. That's all. Yoruichi-san is a very loyal person, after all. And to be honest… I don't think being a squad captain really suited her mentality, in the end."

"I see." Ichigo folded his hands absently together, then, "I guess she must be, if you were breaking rules left right and centre."

"Like I said, that's a whole other story." Urahara shrugged his shoulders. "And one which really doesn't seem that relevant any more. We were discussing the Quincy, after all. Not my past and not Yoruichi-san's."

"What kind of checking up did 2-Bantai do, then, if they didn't find out about how the Quincy powers worked?" Ichigo asked curiously, and Urahara shook his head.

"The details of those assignments are sacrosanct to 2-Bantai and all

who've ever operated within it." He reproached gently. "But you can rest assured that, however much scientific research was carried out on the Quincy at varying times or by varying squads, *we* were still only keeping an eye on their activity. We weren't trying to construct our own version, or manipulate their power to suit ourselves. There was no need, after all. Their power was in conflict with ours. And our priority was to keep the balance — which, now you've been to Soul Society, you probably understand more than you did before."

"Probably." Ichigo agreed grudgingly. "So all you did was spy on them? And that was it?"

"Shinigami in general don't believe there to be much point in any further investigation or involvement with the Quincy." Urahara said dismissively. "Ishida-san has no doubt told you that, and I'll tell you as well. We were briefed to keep survivors under observation. That was the situation at the time I became a seated officer in 2-Bantai and continued even when I was expelled as captain of 12-Bantai. No doubt the same situation remains today."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Even Ishida-san, no doubt. I'm not in a position to know the exact situation, but it wouldn't surprise me at all if there was already a detailed file on him and his life up to now somewhere in Soul Society. He's been an active Quincy, after all. Someone will have recorded something."

He smiled benignly.

"But *I* don't have access to any of Soul Society's data." He added lightly. "And haven't done since I left. So you'll have to try some other channel, if you want to find anything more useful. Still, I would advise you leave it to Ishida-san to resolve. He's better placed to do it than you, and don't forget, Shinigami and Quincy *are* traditionally foes."

"Yeah, but I thought…" Ichigo faltered, and Urahara chuckled.

"You and he are allies." He said wisely. "That won't change… the bonds formed in Soul Society are deeper than that. But the Quincy live by their pride, Kurosaki-san. A slight against that isn't easily forgotten or forgiven, and Ishida-san is no exception to that rule. Let him deal with his problems himself. You dealt with yours, after all. You owe him the same courtesy."

"I suppose." Ichigo sighed heavily, getting to his feet. "I wish he'd stop being so aloof about it, though. It ain't like I'm going to laugh in his face. I've been there too. And I'd rather I knew we were all on the

same side, if shit's going to happen with this Hougyoku thing. That's all."

"I'm sure it will be fine." Urahara assured him. "Have some faith — after all, you'd want him to have faith in you, wouldn't you?"

"Guess so." Ichigo acknowledged. "All right. I get it."

He pulled himself to his feet.

"I better get back." He added. "Don't tell him we had this conversation, huh? If what you said is right, it'll just make things more complicated."

"My lips are sealed." Urahara made an exaggerating zipping motion. "Have a safe journey home, Kurosaki-san."

The park was quiet that evening, as Uryuu made his way through the rows of trees towards the secluded waterfall where he had carried out intensive training to master the *sanrei* glove before their departure to Soul Society. He had forced his power forwards, he knew this, in order to be ready for the task ahead, but even so he did not regret opening his Grandfather's box or donning the implement which had so heightened his ability to fight.

"When you're at war, you use all the weapons available to you." He muttered, sinking down on one of the jagged rocks that lined the edge of the area. "Whatever it takes to win, even if that means the end."

I really believe there'll be a time when we don't have to fight so hard.

The voice echoed through his senses, making him start and swing around, but there was noone there and he berated himself, putting a hand to his chest as he pulled together the fragments of his composure.

He had heard the voice before, somewhere, yet in that moment he found it impossible to place where or from whom.

"But there's only me here." He got to his feet, moving across to run his fingers through the swift-running sheets of water as he got a grip on his senses. "I'm tired, that's all. Too many dreams. Too many late nights. That's all."

For a moment he stood there, enjoying the cool sensation of the trickling water as it rushed over his skin. There was something reassuring in its predictability, he reasoned, that whether he was there or whether he was not, the water would still run in the exact same

way, day and night.

We will never surrender to people like you!

Another voice jolted across his senses, and Uryuu started, his feet sliding on the slippery rock surface. He tumbled to the ground, the freezing water drenching his school clothes, and he cursed, reaching across for something to help him regain his footing.

As he did so, however, he caught sight of the water that pooled around him and he froze, eyes widening in dismay and disbelief as he processed what he was seeing.
Instead of the sparkling, refreshing clearness of fresh water, the liquid that surrounded him had an eerie reddish tint and as he reached a shaking hand across to cup some of it in his hands, he found that the colour only became darker until it was impossible for him to see the lines of his palm through the scarlet murkiness. His heart stilled in his throat as he scrambled away from the waterfall, gazing up at it in horror as he saw the cascading sheets of red rain pouring down towards him, and then, as his gaze drifted to the ledge above, he was sure he saw what may have been the edge of a human torso, stained with the same crimson hue.

This was too much for him to take and he let out a yell, redoubling his efforts to scramble clear of the pool and onto the grass. His breath coming in ragged gasps, he sank down onto the ground, struggling to compose himself once more.

He gripped hold of the grass, wiping his hands frantically against it to remove any traces of the red liquid that still remained, yet try as he might he could not erase the sensation. The sweet scent of blood choked his senses, sending them into overdrive and as his vision blurred, he swallowed hard against the bile that rose in his throat. For an instant he was sure he could hear the anguished cries of the dying and the wounded, and fear stabbed through him once more as slowly he raised his gaze, staring in trepidation across the rest of the park.

The land which moments earlier had been devoid of people had now become transformed into a human wasteland, and Uryuu resisted the urge to clap his bloodied, dirty hand to his mouth as a fresh sense of nausea overcame him. Wherever he looked he could see the mottled mixture of white fabric and deep red stains, and on the horizon he was almost certain he could see the flutter of a black *hakama* as someone disappeared into the trees.

A sudden terror surged through him and he struggled to his feet, staggering a step or two forward. He was looking for something, he

realised — or no, for some*one*, though in the haze of confusion and terror that clouded his brain, he did not know who or why. All he knew was that they were somewhere in this scene of carnage, and somehow he had to track them down.

His gaze blurred again, as the scent of blood once more filled his nostrils, causing him to gag and drop back down to his knees. He closed his eyes, battling to get his trembling body under control as he tried to make sense of all the emotions and sensations that were relentlessly bombarding him, one after another. In the distance he could hear a woman screaming, and his heart lurched in his chest at the desperate pitch in her voice.

"*Niji*!" He exclaimed, forcing his heavy body to his feet, but before he could manage it, someone put a hand on his arm.

Caught up in the heat of the moment, Uryuu wrenched himself away from the newcomer, breathing hard and his fingers clawed at his waist, as if in search of some kind of weapon. As he did so, however, he heard the newcomer speak, and something in her tones brought him back to where he was.

"Ishida-kun? Ishida-kun, are you all right?"

In an instant, as if a curtain had been lifted from in front of his eyes, the pounding sensations that had flooded his brain trickled away to nothing, and slowly he raised his gaze, realising as he did so that the bloody scene had all but disappeared. He swung around, gazing at the waterfall in disbelief as he registered the smooth flow of clear, colourless liquid.

"Ishida-kun?"

This time the speaker was crouched at his side, concern evident in her tone and somehow Uryuu managed to turn his head, meeting her anxious brown eyes with dazed blue ones.

"Inoue… san." He managed at length, and Orihime knotted her brows together, gazing at him in consternation.

"Of course. Who else did you think I was?" She asked curiously, and Uryuu reddened, hurriedly gathering his wits as he realised how foolish he must have appeared. He sat back on the grass, taking a deep breath into his lungs, and Orihime sank down opposite him, her gaze never leaving his face.

"Are you ill?" She asked at length, as the silence threatened to become oppressive. "You looked really tired in class, you know — you shouldn't push yourself too hard, Ishida-kun. Your brain might

overheat, especially with the weather still so warm."

Uryuu stared at her mutely for a moment, and Orihime's frown deepened.

"Ishida-kun?" She murmured. "What happened? You look like you saw a ghost."

"A ghost…?" Uryuu swallowed hard, casting another glance back towards the waterfall. "A ghost would've been nothing. This was… I don't even know what this was."

"Maybe if you told me, I'd be able to help you work it out?" Orihime suggested. "You really don't look very well, you know. You've gone white as a sheet and the shadows under your eyes are huge."

"How can I, if I don't understand it either?" Uryuu snapped, immediately regretting his shortness of tone, but Orihime did not seem offended, merely shrugging her shoulders.

"You didn't seem to see or hear me coming." She said pensively. "And you shouted something — Niji, I think — then… I grabbed your arm, and I guess you woke up? I mean, you weren't asleep exactly, but it was like you were. Kind of."

"Another world…?" Uryuu pursed his lips, his composure settling little by little in Orihime's company. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it was like that."

He sighed, getting to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Inoue-san." He said apologetically. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right." Orihime looked surprised. "We're friends, aren't we? Friends can share stuff — isn't that how it works?"

She laughed.

"I'm always bothering Tatsuki-chan with something or other." She admitted sheepishly. "Though guys don't seem to do it as much as girls do — maybe it's just a gender thing. I don't know."

She glanced up at him.

"Are you going home now?"

"I suppose so." Uryuu nodded. "I came here to think, but I don't really feel much like staying now."

"All by yourself?"

“Yes. Why?”

“You might pass out or something.” Orihime got to her feet. “What you need is sugar — that always helps me when I’m feeling faint.”

“I don’t think I said that I…”

“How about we get ice cream and I’ll walk back with you, to make sure you’re all right?” Orihime suggested, and Uryuu eyed her warily.

“Inoue-san, that’s really not necessary. And I’m not really hungry. After all, I…”

He trailed off, swallowing hard as a fleeting memory of what he had seen flooded his senses. At this, Orihime frowned.

“You really look like you’re going to fall back down.” She said. “Maybe you should stay here a while after all.”

“No. I’m not staying here.” Uryuu shook his head. “I’m fine, Inoue-san. Thank you, but I’ll be all right on my own.”

“But I’ll be worried, if I don’t come with you.” Orihime said frankly. “Besides, you protected me enough in Soul Society. It’s my job now to protect you, isn’t it?”

“Protect is…”

“Then it’s decided.” Orihime nodded her head firmly, reaching out to take her startled companion by the arm. “I’ll come with you back to your place.”

“Inoue-san, you really don’t…” Uryuu began, trailing off as he realised his earnest companion wasn’t listening to his protests in the least. He sighed, yet inwardly he felt a flicker of relief at her intervention. He didn’t understand what had come over him, or why a blood-scene that had one minute seemed so real had suddenly evaporated into nothing. But it had gone, and for that fact he was grateful.

“Inoue-san, my home is in the opposite direction.” He pointed out, some of his usual edge in his voice as they reached the park gates. “I’d rather not walk around the whole city to get there, if it’s all the same to you. It might be a hot day, but my clothes are wet and there’s still a breeze.”

“Wet?” Orihime stopped dead, almost causing her companion to walk into her as she turned to stare at him in consternation. “What happened? Did you fall in the waterfall?”

“Something like that.” Uryuu agreed.

Orihime chewed on her lip for a moment, then she sighed.

“Ishida-kun, what happened?” She asked softly. “You’re not being at all like Ishida-kun today. I mean, at school this morning you were rude to Kurosaki-kun…”

“That’s hardly unusual.” Ishida interjected acidly. “Being rude to someone as rude as Kurosaki comes as second nature — I don’t think he speaks any other language. Besides, had you forgotten that he and I feature on opposite sides of this spiritual equation?”

Orihime frowned, shaking her head.

“But you and Kurosaki-kun are friends now.” She said simply. “In Soul Society we were *all* allies, after all. And I know you tease each other a lot and say nasty things but…”

She sighed.

“Today you seemed to mean it more than you usually do.” She concluded eventually. “Are you cross with him about something? Did he do something wrong?”

“Not particularly.” Ishida gathered his wits, eying her warily. “I told you — I don’t generally have much to say to someone like Kurosaki. We’re complete opposites, after all… now that things are back to normal, there’s no need for us to speak more than we have to.”

“I thought you were quite alike, actually.” Orihime said, surprised.

“Alike?” Ishida’s eyes widened behind his glasses, and Orihime nodded.

“Yeah.” She agreed. “You’re both stubborn and you both believe in stuff and you neither one of you give up or back down. Plus you both want to protect people, and so you fight. Just because you like wearing white and Kurosaki-kun has to wear black, it doesn’t mean you can’t be on the same side after all, does it? After all, Aizen-san and his allies were Shinigami and wore black, but they wound up being the enemy in the end.”

She shrugged.

“I don’t see why Shinigami and Quincy should hate each other anyhow.” She added. “Especially since they both want to do the same thing. I guess I just thought you and Kurosaki-kun thought like that too, to be honest… especially since you have so much in common.”

“I hadn’t really thought of it that…”

“And now this happened today.” Orihime did not give her companion time to ruminate on this, shifting the topic back to the incident in the park as she gazed at him anxiously. “You’re not the kind of person who falls in waterfalls or spaces out in public parks. That’s the kind of thing *I* do — and you’re definitely not me. So what’s wrong? Something is, right?”

Uryuu’s lips thinned, then he took off his glasses, rubbing them absently against his sleeve before sliding them back onto the bridge of his nose.

“I don’t know.” He admitted. “I’m not cross with Kurosaki about anything, not really. I’m cross with myself, but that’s nothing new. And as for what happened in the park… I don’t even know what it was. Just… I don’t want it to happen again.”

“Why are you cross with yourself?” As he continued to walk in the direction of his home, Orihime fell into step alongside him, and Uryuu realised with a jolt that she had every intention of accompanying him right up to the front door.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Is it about what happened in Soul Society?”

“Soul Society?”

“About when you fought against Kurotsuchi-san and all of that?”

“Inoue-san…”

“I thought it must be.” Orihime glanced at her hands. “See, I wasn’t really very useful in Soul Society at all. You had to protect me a lot, and Kurosaki-kun worried about me a lot, and I just got in the way most of the time. So I sort of understand why you feel like that, Ishida-kun. You lost your powers fighting against Kurotsuchi-san because he was so strong and you had to fight so hard. But at least you managed to do that, after all. You should be proud that you did — it’s not your fault if it happened that way.”

“I could’ve killed him, but I didn’t.”

“I don’t think it’s a bad thing not to kill people.” Orihime said seriously. “I liked that you didn’t kill him, Ishida-kun. Or the other one — the big guy whose sword you shot down with your arrows when he attacked me. I think it’s better, that way. It’s not a weak thing.”

She smiled.

“Kurosaki-kun didn’t kill anyone, either.” She added. “I’m glad. The misunderstanding was sorted out and we saved Kuchiki-san from being executed. All in all it went well, even if I wasn’t much help in the end.”

“You underestimate yourself.” Uryuu said quietly. “And at least you still have your powers, Inoue-san. You’re stronger than I am, now. I don’t want to be someone who needs protecting by anyone. I’m a Quincy. It’s not how we fight.”

“But *you* protected *me* while we were there.” Orihime persisted. “Aren’t you proud of that?”

“I hadn’t thought about it.” Uryuu admitted. “But either way, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m countless times weaker and Kurosaki, dammit… Kurosaki…”

“Kurosaki-kun is worried about you too.” Orihime said frankly. “I know he is. His forehead’s been twice as scrunchy lately as it usually is.”

“Twice as…?” Uryuu stared at her blankly, and Orihime grinned.

“I’m sure there’s a way to fix your power, anyhow.” She added firmly. “Kurosaki-kun’s broke, but it got fixed. Yours will be the same, I’m sure.”

“I’m not a Shinigami. Different rules apply.”

“You should at least try to be positive.”

“I’m sorry.” Uryuu dropped his gaze, not wanting to see the reproach in her dark eyes. “I suppose I’m tired. It’s been a long week.”

“Maybe you fell asleep in the park, and wound up falling in the waterfall that way?” Orihime suggested. “Then perhaps you were sleep-walking and I woke you up… which you’re not meant to do, so I guess it’s my fault if you’re feeling ill after all.”

She looked guilty.

“I’m sorry, Ishida-kun. I didn’t mean to.”

“I wasn’t sleep-walking.” Uryuu held up his hands, shaking his head. “And it’s not your fault at all, Inoue-san.”

He frowned.

“Truth is, I haven’t slept well since we came back.” He admitted. “I don’t know why. Weird dreams. Something. I know tiredness catches up with you eventually. I guess what happened in the park was a

hallucination because of that — that's all. You actually did me a favour, snapping me out of it. I'm probably best off going home and taking a nap."

"A hallucination, huh?" Orihime looked pensive. "What kind of hallucination? I guess it wasn't a nice one, because you looked real shaken up."

"That's an understatement." Uryuu said wryly.

"Too horrible to even talk about?"

"You might not want to hear the details."

"I told you, we're friends. You can tell me. I don't mind."

"Blood." Uryuu said bluntly, casting her a glance as he did so, and Orihime's eyes widened in shock.

"Blood?"

"Everywhere. All over me, the waterfall… everywhere." Uryuu nodded. "I was trapped in a field of dying people wherever I looked, and there was blood all over the place."

"Ew." Orihime shivered. "That's gross."

"Yeah, just a little bit." Despite himself, a faint smile twitched at the corners of Uryuu's mouth. Somehow, he reasoned, Orihime's down to earth assessment had taken some of the lingering fear out of the memory, and he nodded his head. "I don't know how to explain it. It just happened… then when you came, it stopped."

"Weird." Orihime pursed her lips. "Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"And it's never happened before?"

"No. Thank God. Never."

"Hrm." Orihime looked thoughtful for a moment, then, "Maybe the sun already did get to you. Or you're studying too hard, or ate something bad for lunch. Or maybe you picked up a bug or something when we were in Soul Society. There were a lot of spirit particles floating around, after all, and we did sleep in some draughty places when we were hiding, so…"

"I don't think that humans can catch diseases from Shinigami, Inoue-san."

"But we weren't properly like humans when we were there."

Orihime reminded him. “Maybe it is possible. Hey, we could go ask Urahara-san — I’m sure *he’d* know, since it was his gate we went through to get there.”

She reached out to grasp his arm once more, but Uryuu shook his head, taking a step back.

“I don’t think I caught Shinigami flu when I was in Soul Society.” He said firmly. “I appreciate your concern, Inoue-san, but I don’t see the point in getting Urahara-san involved. I’m tired, I told you. I’ve not slept right since we came back. Insomnia plays tricks on the brain… I’ll be all right just as soon as I get some rest.”

Orihime eyed him for a moment, then she sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“You really are like Kurosaki-kun, sometimes.” She said resignedly. “Your forehead mightn’t be so scrunchy as his is, but you’re just as bad as each other at letting other people help you. I *told* you. If something’s bothering you, it’s normal to talk to your friends about it.”

Despite himself, Uryuu felt ashamed, and he frowned, meeting her gaze with a sober one of his own.

“I don’t understand what happened today, but I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk to anyone about it.” He said softly. “Whatever it was, the more I dwell on it the more it’s going to bother me… I’d rather forget about it completely.”

Orihime pursed her lips, then she nodded.

“All right.” She agreed reluctantly. “But Ishida-kun? I’m serious, you know. What happened in Soul Society means that we’re all bound together now, more than we ever were before. You, me, Kurosaki-kun, Sado-kun, Kuchiki-san… all of us, beyond being just normal friends. You know it too, don’t you? No matter where we are or what happens now, that won’t change. So if you are worried about something, talk to us — all right? Even if you don’t want to talk to Kurosaki-kun because he’s a Shinigami, well, you can still talk to me. *I’m* not a Shinigami, after all.”

“Inoue-san…” Uryuu stared at her in surprise, and Orihime spread her hands.

“I’m not good at a lot of things.” She said matter-of-factly. “But I think I might be all right at listening, where a friend’s concerned.”

“I’m… not so good at talking.” Uryuu admitted awkwardly, raising

his gaze to the sky as suddenly he found he could not meet her earnest gaze. “But… I’ll bear it in mind.”

“All right.” Orihime nodded, seemingly satisfied. “And this is your street, isn’t it, Ishida-kun? I seem to remember…”

“It’s close enough.” Uryuu agreed. “I’ll see you at school tomorrow, then.”

“You will.” Orihime nodded. “I hope you feel better soon, Ishida-kun.”

With that she was gone, pausing at the end of the street to wave to him before heading back towards the centre of the city.

For a moment Uryuu just stood staring after her as he ran over the conversation once more in his mind. Then he let out a heavy sigh, rubbing his temples.

“Whatever it was, it was connected to those damn dreams. I’m sure of it.” He muttered. “And I need to get a grip before people start thinking I’m losing my wits. If it had been anyone other than Inoue-san who saw me…”

He bit his lip, as he remembered what she had said.

What happened in Soul Society means that we’re all bound together now, more than we ever were before.

“What happened in Soul Society.” He murmured, glancing at his hands. “What *did* happen in Soul Society, anyway? Did I just lose my powers, or did I push myself so far that now I’m suffering the consequences of it? Whatever it is, I need to get it in check. Whyever these things are happening… I’m going to conquer them myself!”

Chapter Four: Reflections

Chapter Four: Reflections

There was a light breeze in the air that morning, and as the lone figure walked slowly through the rows of blooming trees towards his destination, he found himself reflecting on the sudden peace that had fallen over Seireitei. It was a far cry from the chaos of the previous few weeks, and for a moment he just paused, allowing the wind to ruffle gently through his bound hair.

Lord knew, after all, he needed peace.

His gaze darted across the neatly set out plot of land, taking in its fine marble boundaries and the immaculate beauty with which the whole area had been carefully landscaped and tended. It was a place brimming with life — splashed with the colours of Soul Society's most beautiful flowers, and the figure smiled, a strange, bittersweet little smile that touched the barest edges of his lips.

It was an alive place, he reasoned. And that was the way he had always wanted it to be, as if somehow, by investing so much effort into making it so abundant with greenery, he could conceal the true reason for its existence. Deep down he knew that it was nothing more than symbolic, for a dead Shinigami's soul eventually splintered and fragmented into spirit particles that cloaked the landscape all around. Yet, despite the fact that beneath the polished marble there was nothing except earth, it still gave the 6-Bantai Captain some comfort to know that this place was here and that, if he so needed to, he could always go and speak to someone who even now he considered as dear to him as his own existence.

"Byakuya."

At the sound of the familiar voice, Byakuya paused, turning stiffly to face the speaker. There was a flicker of censure in his grey eyes and, at the sight of it the intruder smiled, holding up his hands in surrender.

"Forgive my presumptuousness." He said softly. "But I wasn't aware that you were up and about already. It's good to see — your injuries were grave, after all."

"Ukitake." Byakuya spoke softly, his voice even and disinterested as ever, and Ukitake's smile widened.

“This may be an inappropriate place to talk.” He added. “But I wanted to speak to you… about Kuchiki Rukia.”

“Rukia?” Byakuya’s eyes narrowed slightly, his lips thinning as he digested this fact. For a moment there was silence, then,

“You are aware of what this place is?”

“Yes, I know.” Ukitake’s expression became grave. “And I realise why you’ve come here, too. As I said, my intrusion may be inappropriate… or it may be quite the opposite. I was just wondering… if you intended on having the girl transferred to 6-Bantai now, since everything has been so neatly straightened out.”

“Neatly, you say?” Byakuya’s gaze clouded, as his grey eyes darted across the floral carpet to the clear white marble slab that formed the garden’s centrepiece. “Yes, I suppose it can be seen that way. Seireitei is bereft of Central 46, of course, and three of the Captains are no longer in post. But that aside…”

“I think you understand that I wasn’t talking about Seireitei.” Ukitake said softly. “If your wounds are quite healed, Byakuya, you and I need to discuss that girl and her future. After all…”

“I don’t think that my decisions regarding Rukia are any of your concern.” Byakuya said softly. “And if you don’t mind, I did not come to my wife’s grave in search of company.”

Ukitake’s expression became grave, and he nodded.

“Though they are gone, they never leave us entirely.” he said wisely. “You’ve been through a lot in recent weeks, haven’t you? I’m sorry. I was presuming to understand based on my own past experiences — but I suppose there’s no comparison between losing a valued comrade and one such as Hisana-san.”

“As you say.” Byakuya closed up, shaking his head. “Your Vice Captain was a fool who raced into a battle he could not win. For that reason, my sister has to bear the memory for the rest of her life. I do not see any comparison between that situation and my own.”

Ukitake pursed his lips.

“You fought Kurosaki Ichigo, almost to the death.” He said quietly. “But when you darted in front of Gin’s sword, Byakuya, who were you seeking to protect? Your action was as much for Hisana’s sake as it was for Rukia’s, wasn’t it? In much the same way as Kaien sacrificed himself for his wife’s honour, you were willing to sacrifice your life for your wife’s sister. *I* haven’t forgotten — even if most of Soul Society

never knew — that beneath your noble splendour is an impulsive, hot-headed young man. And for Rukia's sake, I wanted to see that she wasn't going to be burdened with the death of another dear soul, after the smoke cleared."

"I am not so easy to kill." Byakuya said stiffly. "And I am not a boy, Ukitake, not now. I would thank you not to try and draw comparisons between your Vice Captain and me. Shiba Kaien may or may not have been a brave Shinigami — but in the end, he was foolish. And he was weak, so he died."

"We both know that *I* was the weak one, not Kaien." Ukitake said frankly. "And that's why I want to discuss Rukia's future with you. I know that you've always sought to protect her. You won't let her take a seated rank in 13-Bantai, after all, although she's clearly developing power enough to be considered as such."

"Rukia was sent to the real world without my having been consulted, a decision which resulted in her encountering Kurosaki Ichigo and almost in her execution." Byakuya said coolly. "Whether she's a seated officer or not, it seems that 13-Bantai isn't as safe a place as it appears to be."

"That's why I wondered about your intentions."

"I have no intention to make any changes whatsoever." Byakuya replied frankly. "Rukia is a member of your squad. She isn't my responsibility to 'settle', after all."

"I see." Ukitake's expression softened. "So that's how it is, is it? She's a young woman, not just a child?"

"I don't know what you're implying." Byakuya took a few steps away from his colleague, pointedly stopping beside Hisana's memorial. "The decision has nothing to do with whether or not I consider you a competent captain or well placed to protect her, Ukitake. Aside from the fact her being in my constant company would no doubt distract my Vice Captain from his duties, there is a very simple reason why Rukia will remain with you."

"And that is?"

Byakuya paused, then a faint glimmer of a smile touched his lips. It was gone in an instant, but he knew that his fellow Captain had seen it, and understood.

"Rukia seems fond of your squad." He said off-handedly. "For some reason I can't fathom, she seems quite happy in 13-Bantai."

Ukitake smiled.

“Then she’s more than welcome to stay.” He said matter-of-factly. “To be honest, I’m glad that your decision is that way. I like the girl, Byakuya. She’s strong and determined and she has great character which is little by little being padded out by strength as her confidence grows.”

“You can be too much in the shade of the Kuchiki family tree.” Byakuya murmured, half to himself as he bent to dust stray petals off Hisana’s grave. “Kurosaki Ichigo was the one who taught me that… much as I dislike to admit it. He is a rude, hapless boy… but because of him, Rukia is still alive. And I have been able to keep my word to Hisana, after all.”

He turned, eying the other captain suspiciously.

“How is it you came to know about Rukia and Hisana’s connection? I am certain I spoke of it to noone but Rukia.”

“Unohana Retsu.” Ukitake said evenly. “Though there were several Shinigami present when you were speaking to her, Byakuya. I’m sure others heard it, too.”

“It has nothing to do with anyone outside of Rukia or myself.” Byakuya murmured, and Ukitake shrugged.

“Possibly not.” He agreed. “And I have no intention of discussing it with anyone, either. I’m glad to know that she’ll be reporting back to 13-Bantai when she’s fit… and also happy to see you healing, although from your stiff movements, I imagine Unohana-taichou hasn’t given you leave to be up and around yet, after all.”

“I am well enough to do this.” Byakuya said simply. “I am not about to enter battle, and besides, convalescence is interminably boring.”

“Yes… so it is.” A flicker of comprehension flooded Ukitake’s clever gaze, and Byakuya pursed his lips, gazing at his sallow faced companion and remembering with vivid clarity how the experienced Captain’s promising career had so often been disturbed in the past by his frequent and chronic bouts of sickness. For a moment it reminded him of Hisana’s final days, and he frowned, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Rukia is best off with you.” He added softly, turning back to Hisana’s grave once more. “There is nothing that 6-Bantai could give her that 13-Bantai cannot. It is better that way. But you should appoint a new Vice Captain, Ukitake. Your health is unstable, and it

makes your squad unstable, with those two young idiots running round attempting to understand what the role should be."

"Replacing Kaien isn't so easy as that." Ukitake shook his head. "But who knows. In time, I'm sure, 13-Bantai will find another Vice Captain. Perhaps one of the same calibre as your own… Abarai-kun has come on tremendously in the past few months alone. For a Shinigami to achieve Bankai is always an impressive thing — perhaps there's a silver lining to all of this chaos, after all. At least it's made us all realise who our allies are — and who they are not. When things are peaceful, sometimes those lines get obscured."

"Renji." Byakuya pursed his lips. "Perhaps he has. He is easily distracted — but perhaps he has more promise than I thought."

He spread his hands.

"And I have no intention of letting him become reckless and easily killed." He added softly. "Whatever future he is or isn't to have, he is still too rough-edged to be cool-headed in a dangerous situation. And that might put people in danger, if I was to bring Rukia into my own squad. It seems more logical to leave her with you in all respects."

Ukitake's dark eyes became thoughtful, and he nodded his head.

"In which case, the matter is resolved." He said frankly. "Now that I know what you think regarding Rukia, I'll leave you to yourself. My apologies for the intrusion, Byakuya — thank you for humouring an old man's doubts."

With that the other captain turned on his heel, and Byakuya watched him leave the garden, pursing his lips as he contemplated Ukitake's intrusion.

"Renji is also a fool." He mused. "But Rukia would be hurt if he was killed. And if she was in 6-Bantai, no doubt he would put her safety above his own. He proved that by challenging me so recklessly, after all. Bankai or no Bankai, he and Kurosaki Ichigo both are fools who will die sooner than they should if they don't learn to have some restraint."

He knelt down beside Hisana's grave, ignoring the twinges of pain that ran through his aching, wounded body as he put his hands together slowly in prayer.

"Forgive me for telling her the truth, Hisana." He murmured. "But at this point, I think, it's time she knew. You asked me to be a big brother to her, after all. I don't know if I'll ever be able to keep that promise as much as you hoped. But I will do a better job of protecting

her, now. Thanks to that boy, Ukitake is right. All is resolved and the Kuchiki-ke are once more well. From hereon in, if she needs my help, I will ensure that whatever is in my power to do, I will do. It's not as though I can do more than that, after all."

He closed his eyes, picturing Hisana's smiling face, and a bittersweet wave of emotion washed over his heart.

"If only she didn't look like you so much." He murmured sadly. "Maybe then I'd find it easier to keep my word."

"Looks like rain."

Ichigo tied the lace on his trainers, standing upright and stretching his hands over his head as he stifled a yawn. "Could'a guessed it, that we'd go out t'play soccer and it'd chuck it down. Another pretty typical end to another day at school — yo, Chad, are you coming?"

"I'm coming." His huge companion, big, gentle-hearted Sado Yasutora nodded his head, following his friend to join the rest of their male classmates out on the middle of the soccer pitch where an antagonised Phys. Ed teacher was already struggling to keep his gaggle of adolescent boys in check. Across the other side of the field, the girls were already busy running laps, and Ichigo grimaced, rolling his eyes as he overheard snippets of the conversation.

"I could watch Inoue run all day. Beats class all the time."

"Shut up, you pervert. All you do is stare at that girl's tits anyway."

"With good reason! Ain't you seen them? They're frigging huge — seriously, what's wrong with your brain that you don't see it!"

"Idiots." From behind him, Ichigo heard Uryuu muttering to himself and he frowned, turning to see his bespectacled classmate casting a dark glower in the direction of the offending boys. Despite himself, he smiled.

"All right, you bunch of idiots, settle down." The teacher blew his whistle, raising his voice over the buzz of chatter. "I want your undivided attention — whoever ain't with the program will be stopping behind to collect stray tennis balls from this morning's class, understood? No second chances — I'm fed up of you louts thinking you can go to sleep in this lesson and coast it because it's last thing in the afternoon."

He scoured the crowd, then,

“Kurosaki! You’ve decided to at least join the class today, then?”

Ichigo jerked to attention, casting the teacher a sheepish look.

“Yes, sir.”

“I trust that whatever injury you developed the last two lessons has miraculously healed now, and you’re not about to dash off to medical in the middle of class again today?”

“I… no sir. I’m fine. Really. All healed up.”

Ichigo laughed awkwardly, scratching his head as he met the teacher’s gaze. “Funny things, injuries. I feel fine now.”

“Funny thing is that you seemed to make a recovery before even reaching the medical bay.” The teacher sent him a meaningful look. “Last chance, Kurosaki. I mean it. I’m not going to tolerate people skipping off home early because something good’s on the TV. Phys. Ed is a class as much as Maths or History, and your attendance lately has been pretty off. You understand? I expect you here till final whistle today.”

“Yes, sir.” Ichigo sighed, nodding his head and inwardly hoping that no Hollows would choose to interrupt their lesson that afternoon. “I understand.”

“Right.” The teacher turned his attention back to the group as a whole. “We’re going to split into five-a-side. Nakamura, you can be one captain. Sado, you can come be another. Kojima, don’t think I don’t see you hiding behind Sado — you come out here and pick a team too. And… let’s see… Ouhara, you too.”

“Crap.” Ichigo heard Mizuiro mutter, and he caught his friend’s gaze, offering him a rueful grimace. “I guess that means I actually have to get dirty this class.”

“Depends if you’re playing against Chad, probably.” Keigo put in thoughtlessly. “He’ll trample you in the mud, Mizuiro.”

He grinned at his two selected friends.

“But at least I won’t be the last picked this time, huh? If you guys are captains.”

“That depends on whether they want their butts kicked.” Ichigo gave him a little shove. “You’re useless at sport, Keigo… noone in their right mind’d choose you.”

“Ichigo’s probably right.” Mizuiro observed absently. “You have two left feet, after all, Keigo.”

He cast his companion a parting grin, then followed his well-built friend to the front of the group.

“You guys are always mean as hell to me.” Keigo pulled a face. “Ichigo, is it really that much fun taking the piss out of me?”

“Yes.” Ichigo told him blandly. “Besides, I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true. You are shit at sport. Friends or not, even if I was team captain, I wouldn’t pick you.”

“I can’t be the worst in the class.” Keigo defended himself. “What about… hey, what about Ishida? He has *glasses*, for God’s sake, and his head’s always in a book… do you think that someone’d pick *him* over me?”

“Do you want me to answer that?” Ichigo arched an eyebrow, and Keigo frowned.

“What is it with you and Ishida these days, Ichigo?” He demanded, and Ichigo shrugged his shoulders, offering his friend a smile.

“Nothing.” He said simply. “Just, I think you’re worse at sport than he is. S’all. Wearing glasses doesn’t mean anything. Besides, he wears them an’ he can see. Right? You ain’t got a cure for your left feet.”

“Kurosaki.” At that moment the teacher’s voice broke across the conversation. “Are you paying attention? Sado just selected you — you could try listening instead of talking, and you might learn something.”

“Sorry, sensei.” Ichigo pulled a face, scrambling to the front of the group as he cast Chad a grin. “Cheers, Chad.”

“No problem.” Chad said seriously in his usual deep tones, turning his gaze back towards the rest of the group. “Ichigo, do you think I should choose Ishida?”

“Ishida?” Ichigo cast him a startled look, following his friend’s gaze to where the year’s top student was standing a little apart from the rest of the crowd, apparently lost in thought. “He looks like he’d rather be anywhere on earth than here.”

“He seems troubled by something.” Chad reflected.

“When isn’t he?” Ichigo snorted. “What the hell are we meant to do about it, anyhow? If it’s him losing his power, he hasn’t talked to us so we can’t do a damn thing to fix it. Urahara hasn’t any ideas… besides, I’m getting sick of his attitude. The last few days he’s been prickly as God knows what and deliberately snappy towards me. If he wants to sulk, let him. He doesn’t seem to want to spend time with us, so fine.

Summer's ended. Let him do what he likes."

"Hrm." Chad's brow furrowed, and Ichigo saw a thoughtful look cross his friend's dark eyes. Slowly he shook his head.

"Inoue's noticed it too." He said softly. "This morning, I heard her at the gate, asking him if he'd got enough sleep last night. It seemed an odd question, even for Inoue… but when I looked at Ishida in roll call, it did look like he hadn't had much sleep."

"Yeah, I noticed that too." Ichigo admitted. "But I don't see what we can do about him. If he doesn't want our help…"

"Sado, pick your next player, please." The teacher cut across them, and Chad frowned, casting Ichigo a quizzical glance. Ichigo shrugged his shoulders.

"Your call." He said dismissively. "I don't think there's anything to be gained by it, but it's up to you."

Chad's frown deepened, then he shook his head.

"Asano." He said, meeting the teacher's gaze with a resigned one of his own, and Keigo let out a whoop, hurrying across the field to join them.

"See! I told you!" He exclaimed, punching Ichigo playfully on the arm. "I said I wouldn't be last."

"You should be glad Chad's kinder'n Mizuiro." Ichigo told him scathingly. "If it'd been me, I'd have left you to sweat it out."

"Chad's just a proper friend." Keigo sulked. "Unlike some people I could mention."

"You sound like a girl." Was Ichigo's unsympathetic response, clapping a light hand across the back of his friend's head. "Quit it, will you? You really got sensitive over the summer… yeesh."

"Maybe it's something to do with the fact that my so-called friends were all on so-called trips without inviting me to tag along." Keigo sent first Ichigo then Chad dark looks. "And even now you're back you won't say a thing about it — any of you. It's driving me crazy, that's all! I hate being out of the loop! It's not fair, and…"

"You're whining again." Ichigo cut across him. "I told you already. Quit it."

He cast Chad a glance.

"Besides, you didn't miss anything." He said casually. "Summer

wasn't anythin' special, Keigo. If there was somethin' to talk about, we'd be talkin'. You'd be bored rigid. No point."

"It would have been better if I'd kept my own shirt." Chad reflected absently, and Keigo shot him an odd look.

"Your own… shit, Chad, Ichigo's lying, isn't he? You met girls, didn't you? You did, and you got naked, and…"

Ichigo clapped his hand over his classmate's mouth, as members of Mizuiro's nearby team started to stare their way.

"What is your problem?" He demanded. "Chad never said anything like that. He lost a shirt. Geez. Why do you read innuendoes into everything? He lost his shirt, and Ishida made another, and that's all. No girls, no getting naked, nothing. All right? For God's sake!"

Keigo stiffened, and he thrust Ichigo's hand away from his mouth with an angry snort.

"I knew it." He muttered. "Ishida again. Shit, Ichigo, why do you keep lying? What is he, your secret lover or something? Is that why there were no girls involved in this holiday — did you take up with *Megane-kun* over there and that's what all the big secrets are about?"

"Keigo, dammit!"

Ichigo balled his fists, preparing to punch his friend in the stomach, but Chad held out his hand, neatly diverting the force of the redhead's blow with his own immense fist.

"If you fight in class you'll get sent to the Principal." He said sensibly. "Both of you. And then neither of you will be going to Mizuiro's concert tonight."

"But did you hear what he said?" Ichigo demanded, and even his spiky hair seemed to be bristling with indignation as he squared up to his friend. "Shit, Chad, did you…?"

"Yes, I heard." Chad agreed calmly, turning to meet Keigo's gaze with an even one of his own.

"Ichigo and I had part time jobs during the holiday, and so did Ishida." He said levelly. "We did a lot of running around and our clothes got dirty and damaged quite a lot. Sometimes we had to wear specific outfits in order to meet a dress code — and in the resultant melee, I lost my shirt. Ishida likes needlework, so he made a new one."

Keigo looked wary, glancing from Ichigo to his taller companion.

“And Inoue-san? She was there too?”

“Yes. She had family there who she was staying with.” Ichigo lowered his fists, somewhat calmed by Chad’s easy, simple explanation.

Keigo’s eyes narrowed.

“I overheard her talking about someone called Yachiru-chan the other day…”

“Her cousin.” Ichigo thought quickly. “She was stopping with them at the 11-Ba… er… Eleventh District, and we were working not far away. Right, Chad?”

“Right.” A slight smile touched Chad’s lips, as humour glittered in his clever dark eyes. “Ichigo even became on friendly terms with her Uncle Ken.”

Ichigo’s eyes widened, and he stared at his soft-spoken companion in dismay, but Keigo was apparently thinking this over.

“And… Ikkaku-san?”

“I guess you could say he works for Uncle Ken.” Ichigo gave up, offering his friend a resigned smile. “Anyhow, that’s how it was. We had work there and so we saw her a few times. It’s like I said. No big deal. So stop dreaming up lurid sex scandals, okay? You’re weird enough without adding depraved pervert to the list.”

He snorted, casting his glance across the field to where Uryuu was still standing, apparently oblivious of both their conversation and the presence of his fellow students. There was a strange, distant look in his eye, Ichigo decided, but he could not quite place what the expression was. Chad’s words rang through his thoughts again, and absently he found himself cursing the Quincy’s obstinacy and pride for probably the umpteenth time since the two had met.

“To be honest, I’m glad.” Keigo admitted, bringing the redhead back to the present with a jolt. “That it was innocent, I mean. Shit, though, why you didn’t just…”

“I’ve been trying to tell you nothing happened since we came back.” Ichigo snapped. “You don’t listen. Chad says it and you believe it right away, but me?”

“Chad tells the truth more than you do.” Keigo said carelessly. “That’s all.”

He frowned.

“What’s biting Ishida’s ass today, anyhow? He’s just standing there like a lemon — he looks more out of it than usual.”

“I should have picked him.” Chad looked guilty, and Ichigo snorted.

“Why? So he can lecture us about something so small an’ uninportant noone else’s even noticed it?” He demanded. “Spare me.”

“I’ll wake him up.” Keigo decided, grabbing up one of the pile of footballs and tossing it up into the air, catching it in his hands. “Wanna bet if I can snap him out of it?”

Before either of his companions could react, he had dropped the ball onto the ground, taking aim at it and launching a wild kick that sent the small round sphere hurtling across the field to where Uryuu was standing. Though Keigo’s aim was usually worse than most of the class put together, this time he had sent up a perfect shot, and it collided against the side of Uryuu’s head, sending his glasses toppling to the ground and knocking the Quincy clean off his feet.

Ichigo let out an exclamation, even as the teacher blew his whistle, reaching out to grab Keigo roughly by the arm.

“Asano! Enough horseplay. Save shots like that for the field, else you’ll be seeing me after class.” He said sharply. “Ishida! Are you all right?”

This last to the toppled student, who, as if waking from a daze, was slowly picking himself up.

“Sensei?” He murmured, and the teacher frowned, shoving Keigo aside and striding across the grass to haul the fallen boy to his feet.

“Look at me.” He commanded, and Uryuu did as he was bidden, meeting the instructor’s concerned gaze with blank blue eyes.

“Yes, sir?” He asked, faintly confused by the instruction, and the teacher’s lips thinned.

“Sit this one out.” He said at length, bending to pick up the boy’s glasses and handing them back to him. “Here. If you paid better attention, you wouldn’t get clocked by idiots deciding to make their first on target shot, but I won’t take any risks. You seem a bit dazed — sit out, all right? If you feel funny, you’re goin’ inside to medical. Understand? So speak up, if you do.”

“All right.” Uryuu looked surprised. “I feel fine, though, sir. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Keigo just kicked his ball at your thick head, is why.” Ichigo put in

at that moment.

“Kurosaki, this isn’t to do with you.” The teacher sent him a warning glance, but Uryuu sent his classmate a startled glance.

“Ball? At my head? When?”

“Shit, you really *are* concussed.” Ichigo stared.

“Enough of this.” The teacher put his whistle to his lips, blowing it once more. “Kurosaki, Sado, return to your team. Asano, if you do one more hairbrained thing this session I swear you’ll be seein’ stars yourself, so keep it in mind. Ishida, take a seat. We’re playing ball now.”

“Did you hear him?” As they ran reluctantly back towards the rest of the pack, Ichigo cast Chad a quizzical glance, and the gentle giant nodded, consternation in his own clever dark eyes.

“As though he didn’t even know what hit him. Literally.” He agreed.

“I know he’s lost his powers, but surely if he can still sense Hollow reiatsu he’d be able to register a friggin’ great soccer ball bein’ kicked at his head?” Ichigo demanded. “For once in his life Keigo kicked straight. How could he not have felt that? It knocked him down, for chris’sake!”

“Beats me.” Chad looked helpless.

“I swear, he’s getting stranger by the day.” Ichigo groaned. “Come on. Forget it, for now. But later on I swear I’m going to kick sense into him — or kick it out of him — or one or the other, depending on which is the most painful. I’ve about had enough… this ain’t goin’ on any longer.”

Chad grunted his agreement, reaching to take a ball from the pile. He paused for a moment, turning to cast Uryuu a final glance. Then he nodded, tossing the ball from one hand to the other.

“I’m ready.” he said softly. “Let’s play.”

Author’s Note:

I’ve noticed speculation in the reviews about what’s going on with Ishida heh I’m not going to say what is, exactly, yet… although I will say that the whole Rain Dragon thing is important, and so is the fight with Kurotsuchi (the Clown — LOL — I must have Ishida refer to him as that at some point, that was brilliant XD)

Although I'm letting this story take itself, I'll own up and say that my favourite characters, after Ishida, are Urahara and Byakuya, followed by, probably, Ukitake and Kira. So if anyone wants to know who might be playing a part in this story… er… no brainer?

More from Renji, Rukia and Orihime, no doubt, too… dunno about Chad yet. I have nothing against him — actually, I'm quite fond of him. But I have a feeling in this story he might wind up being a spare part :S Sorry to any Chad fans :S

Hrm… did Keigo go too far this time..? I think I turned him into an Ichigo fangirl :S Whoops. :S

Chapter Five: Under The Radar

Chapter Five: Under The Radar

"Report, Nemu."

Kurotsuchi leant back in his seat, swivelling it around to face his Vice Captain as she softly pushed open the door, sidling into the room without a single sound. At his words she bowed her head obediently, her thick braid of hair falling over her shoulder as she did so, and brought herself more firmly into the room.

"Yes, Mayuri-sama. It's just as you expected. The Quincy boy's reiatsu has spiked in just the manner your hypothesis predicted."

"Of course it did, you stupid girl." Kurotsuchi snapped impatiently, glaring at her as if she was wasting his time. "Well? More than that? Or is that as much as you've managed to glean from a whole morning of surveillance work in front of my most technical computer program yet?"

"I… My deepest apologies, Mayuri-sama." Nemu said softly. "I am useless, but there is little more to report. This morning I had a Vice Captain's meeting, and afterwards…"

"Did I ask to hear your excuses, girl?" Kurotsuchi was on his feet, bringing his hand sharply down with a resounding thwack across his creation's left cheek. "If I wanted to know about your dull and unimportant work schedule I would have asked about it! The Quincy, Nemu. The Quincy! You can't tell me that even with a few hours away from the screen all you've gleaned from this is one measly spike in reiatsu?"

His eyes narrowed, displeasure glittering meanly in his unusual eyes.

"Don't tell me you failed to infuse him with the correct solution after all?"

"No, Mayuri-sama. It was the right solution. I am quite sure of that." Nemu did not flinch at the physical show of aggression, meeting her Captain's gaze with a calm one of her own.

"Then report, dammit! Tell me everything — every little detail! That Quincy runt has no spiritual power of his own to speak of, so any spike in his reiatsu is indication of abnormal activity. Tell me what

you know, Nemu, before I shake it out of you by force!”

Nemu was silent for a moment, eying her Captain impassively. Then she nodded her head.

“There is one thing, Mayuri-sama, though I did not think it was important.” She began, and Kurotsuchi snorted, shaking his head in irritation.

“I am the one who decides importance. Not you.” He snapped. “Did you forget that I made you and I can break you just as easily as I can break a twig of wood from a tree or a glass vial from the laboratory? You are nothing more than my lab rat, Nemu. You do not make decisions. Remember that, before I damage you in ways even your body won’t be able to repair.”

“My sincere apologies, Mayuri-sama. It was presumptuous of me.” Nemu dropped to the ground before him in a gesture of humility. “At once, I will report every detail.”

She gazed up at him, taking in the shadows that the scientific equipment cast across her Captain’s covered face as she did so. In that moment, he seemed truly demonic, yet despite that fact Nemu felt comforted. Mayuri-sama was back to himself again, despite the severity of the injury he had suffered. And if that was the case, everything could, at last, return to normality.

“The Quincy’s reiatsu tremors when he sleeps.” She said softly. “As though somehow his dream patterns are connected to what Mayuri-sama is studying. But there was one moment when it rose even more than that — a period of maybe four or five minutes when it swung up to almost the same level as it was when you and he first encountered one another in Seireitei, sir.”

“Almost the same level, you say.” Kurotsuchi rubbed his false chin thoughtfully, his earlier anger dissipated by new and exciting scientific questions. “But it is quite impossible that he has regained his Quincy powers in any regard?”

“As you predicted, Mayuri-sama, he has not.”

“Then this is interesting indeed.” Kurotsuchi mused. “And you were going to dismiss it as worthless! Useless wretch of a girl! Still… tell me, Nemu, was there anything particularly distinctive in the boy’s behaviour during this rise? Anything that might hold any other nuance? Anything at all?”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu nodded. “There was fear. High levels of fear. And one other thing.”

“Well, spit it out. What other thing?”

“The girl was the one who brought his levels back down to his current normal status.” Nemu said quietly. “The human girl, who was with him when Mayuri-sama met him in Seireitei. The one with red hair, who Mayuri-sama wished to study.”

“Ah yes. That girl.” Kurotsuchi’s eyes narrowed to near slits. “I recall her quite well. Perhaps there will be added benefits to this experiment — more and more as I go on.”

He turned his back on her, pacing across the chamber to a shelf where books lay haphazardly piled up in no particular order. They had all been covertly borrowed from the archive, Nemu knew, and arranged in such a careless manner so as not to alert anyone to their importance or the secret nature of their contents. Within these volumes were segments of research from times past — studies carried out by Shinigami long gone and whose works had been sealed away in perpetuity for the safety of themselves and of all of Soul Society. Yet this had been no deterrent for Kurotsuchi, and as soon as he had become Captain of 12-Bantai, he had done his best to secure the most tantalising volumes for his own private collection.

He sought one of them now, pulling it from the pile and dusting imaginary specks from the cover.

For a moment he skimmed through the pages, then he paused, raising his gaze to meet his subordinate’s.

“Nemu, that girl… the one who can manifest shields. You said that she returned his levels to normal? How, pray, did she achieve that? Is this another power that I have not yet had a chance to witness?”

“I think she just talked to him, Mayuri-sama.” Despite herself, Nemu was surprised. “I didn’t detect any reading of any power emission in their encounter. Just her reiatsu and his own dropping. That’s all.”

“Yet the two were undoubtedly connected? Her interference was the key to breaking the abnormal levels of reiatsu our Quincy friend was emitting?”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama. So it would seem.”

“So it would seem is not good enough.” Kurotsuchi told her coldly. “I want definitive fact, not theorising. Find out. I want to know more about their connection and what involvement this girl has with the Quincy. He fought to protect her as much as himself and his sorry code of honour when we met in Seireitei. I saw it in his eyes — that

desire to protect that some of the would-be heroes ooze from every pore here, day in, day out. He's one of those… one who must have something to protect or die, and it may prove useful to know more."

"Yes, Mayuri-sama." Nemu bowed her head, getting to her feet.

"And Nemu? Keep up the surveillance. However minimal the change, I want to know every step. After all, if my theories pan out, things should get more interesting from this point on."

"Yes, Mayuri-sama."

"What's this? Hard at work on something new already, Kurotsuchi?"

At that moment the door of the chamber swung back once more, and Kurotsuchi visibly bristled at the sight of the intruder.

"Kyouraku! Why don't you knock? This isn't a place you can just walk in and out of, you know — this is a research establishment, and we do have a certain amount of secrecy to…"

"Well, I'm sorry. I guess I didn't realise." Kyouraku interrupted him, offering him an indolent smile as he removed his hat in mock deference to Nemu. "My apologies to your Vice Captain too, I'm sure, if I startled her."

"I'm quite all right, Kyouraku-taichou." Nemu said primly, and Kyouraku's smile widened as he returned the straw *kasa* to his head.

"Good, good." He said evenly. "Perhaps, Kurotsuchi, if you want more privacy you should think about locking the doors more often. That, or hiring better guards to keep people out… your subordinates simply saluted me and let me walk straight in, so I assumed it was fine for me to do so."

Kurotsuchi merely sent him a poisonous glower, and Kyouraku laughed.

"Well? This looks exciting." He murmured, reaching over to scoop up the book that Kurotsuchi had discarded a few moment's earlier. "Wooh. Deep stuff. Particle fragmentation in Seireitei's upper atmosphere, huh… you sure aren't into light reading, now are you?"

"Give me that." Kurotsuchi snatched the book from his companion's hands, glaring at him like a cornered alley cat. "If you haven't any need to see me, then please, go. I have a lot of work to do and even if you can spend your days sleeping and avoiding your duties, I'm not that kind of Captain."

“No… I realise that.” Kyouraku offered him another indolent smile. “But as a matter of fact, I do have a reason to be here.”

He set the book down on a nearby unit, leaning carelessly up against the door frame as he regarded his fellow Captain casually.

“You should really remember to return your library books, by the way. That one’s sure to be a fair bit overdue by now, don’t you think?”

“Kyouraku, I already told you…”

“Ah, yes. Of course.” Kyouraku held up his hands in mock surrender. “I’m afraid it’s Yama-jii’s fault I’m here at all. You see, considering the outcome, he’s chosen not to take it too seriously that Ukitake and I destroyed the Soukyoku. However, it’s quite a costly and serious piece of damage, and, well, right at the moment it’s not something that’s easily fixed. So, in the meantime, Yama-jii’s charged us both with writing full reports on the incident… and the best way to go about patching it up. If, of course, it can be — that seal’s so ancient that none of us really know what will happen if it’s tried. Not even Yama-jii.”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders carelessly.

“I tried telling him that reports really weren’t my style, and that it would be better if I sent Nanao-chan to investigate, but he was insistent that I had to do something to atone for the vandalism and insubordination. Something about rank and status — went over my head a little, that one. In any case…”

“If you have a point, please, get to it.” Kurotsuchi snapped. “Well?”

“I just wondered what notes you might have on the origin of the Soukyoku.” Kyouraku smiled sweetly. “And what the chances were of me borrowing them for a while?”

“I’ve told you before. Go through the correct channels if you want to apply for data.” Kurotsuchi said flatly, and Kyouraku affected a hurt expression.

“You’re always so rigid when it comes to that rule.” He said softly.

“Of course.” Kurotsuchi drew himself up to his full height. “If I don’t maintain regulations here, anyone might walk in and snatch information they aren’t authorised to have! With situations like Aizen’s recent defection, can you be surprised that I’d be so cautious?”

“Not at all.” Kyouraku assured him lightly. “Only you might want to explain that to Yama-jii when I tell him you’ve a couple of secure

volumes here that I distinctly remember sealing away in seclusion myself, a few hundred years ago."

He shrugged, turning on his heel as his pink patterned cape billowed out behind him. "I guess I'll do as you say and follow protocol. Thank you for your time, Kurotsuchi. Nemu-chan."

"Wait!" Kurotsuchi called him back, and Nemu glanced at her Captain, seeing the tension suddenly ripple through his still healing body.

Kyouraku turned slowly back.

"Yes?" He asked innocently, and Kurotsuchi shot him the most vile look he could muster.

"If I can find time, I'll look and see if there's any data on Soukyoku that doesn't need to be processed through the usual channels." He said darkly. "Seeing as it's a Captain that's asking, and on the Sou-Taichou's behalf, I'm sure it's a legitimate enquiry."

"There, I knew we could negotiate a deal." Kyouraku's eyes twinkled. "I appreciate it, Mayuri-kun. Keep up the good work, both of you."

With that he tipped his hat again, then, with another sweep of his cape, he disappeared out of the room.

Once he had gone, Kurotsuchi let out a screech of frustration, and Nemu took an instinctive step back, knowing that such losses of temper usually resulted in her gaining new bruises.

"I hate that man and his smug laziness." Kurotsuchi muttered, clenching and unclenching his fists. He swung around, glaring at Nemu.

"Well? What are you still doing here? Get out! You have work to do!"

"Yes, Mayuri-sama." Hurriedly Nemu did as she was bidden, pulling the door of the chamber closed behind her and then hurrying down the hall to the surveillance laboratory. Behind her she could hear the sound of remonstrations and crashes that indicated hard objects being tossed against an equally hard wall, and she let out her breath in a long, slow sigh.

Mayuri-sama was definitely back to himself again. And as for the Quincy boy… things were about to get very much more complicated indeed.

“Well?”

As Kyouraku pushed open the door of his friend’s quarters, Ukitake glanced up from where he was sat up in bed, his captain’s *haori* pulled over his nightclothes to keep out the chill. At his questioning expression, Kyouraku nodded, his expression becoming serious as he dropped down onto his knees.

“You were right.” He said softly. “Kurotsuchi is definitely up to something.”

“I thought so.” Ukitake frowned, pulling the *haori* more tightly around him as a shiver ran through his body. “Damn this chest of mine! I would have gone myself, but… was he any trouble? I mean, you didn’t… antagonise him in any way?”

“No more than usual.” Kyouraku said casually, humour glittering in his eyes, but deep down they reflected concern, and as a cough wracked Ukitake’s slender frame, he reached out an arm to support the other’s back. “Hey, steady on. If talking’s going to make you cough like that…”

“It’s all right.” Ukitake held up his hand, his voice hoarse and a little breathless, but otherwise more or less his own. “It’s my own fault. I was trying to defy my own strength, I think, walking out to speak to Byakuya yesterday. It was a conversation that needed to be had and, with things in such disarray of late and with Kurotsuchi not having presented himself at any Captain meetings since his injury healed, I wanted to try and keep going as long as I could. But I suppose it was only a matter of time that the strain of releasing the seal and going up against Genryuusei-sensei caught up with me. I’m really not a young man now, after all.”

“Even when you were, this was the norm, though.” Kyouraku leant up against the wall of the chamber, eying his friend in resignation. “Well? Do you want to finish this conversation now, or do you want to rest and have it later?”

“No, now is fine.” Ukitake shook his head. “I’ll survive, and it’s important — just as settling Rukia’s future was important yesterday. If Kurotsuchi’s got one of his hairbrained schemes…”

“It’s nothing to do with Soukyoku, I’m fairly sure of that.” Kyouraku assured him. “When I asked him for data he was completely uninterested in the subject. But he had been holding forth to that poor Vice Captain of his about something or other as I came in, and I picked up a volume on spirit particle distribution while I was in his chamber. One that was reported missing from the archive about sixty

years ago, I'll add — but that's not really my problem, so I left it where it was."

"Spirit particle…?" Ukitake frowned. "In what sense?"

"Haven't a clue." Kyouraku stifled a yawn. "Spying is tiring work, after all."

"You're as unreliable as ever, you know that?" Ukitake sent him an affectionate grin. "But I'm glad you went. Even if to put my mind at rest that the man doesn't intend to try and replicate or experiment with Soukyoku or the seal in any way. He's brilliant, perhaps, but sometimes I wonder whether Urahara did the right thing, letting him out of confinement."

"Well, when you consider the insanity that frequently walks Seireitei, I don't think it would be fair to lock up just Kurotsuchi." Kyouraku observed idly. "After all, crazy as he is, he isn't a traitor. And much as he gives that poor girl of his hell, he's more concerned with his experiments than in trying to grasp more political power. We could do a lot worse for a Captain, considering recent events. I'll take him as he is, I think… its all relative in the end."

"Sadly, I fear you're right." Ukitake sighed. "A Soul Society who are three Captains down has no room to talk about suitability."

He coughed again, closing his eyes briefly to steady himself, and Kyouraku frowned.

"Three Captains down and one who's always pushing himself beyond his limits." He said softly. "You should listen to Unohana Retsu more than you do, you know. Appoint yourself a new Vice Captain, if it will take some of the workload off of you. Kiyone and that hairbrained friend of hers mean well, but neither one of them are Vice Captain material and we both know it. Shiba Kaien was a fine man and a brave officer, but he and many of those who fought with him are no longer here. It's time you reflected on that a little, you know. It can't go on forever this way."

"Byakuya said as much to me yesterday, too." Ukitake admitted, his gaze flitting to the window towards the rise that sheltered the great Kuchiki estate. "I know neither of you are wrong, either. But Kaien isn't someone who's easy to replace. And though I see your reasoning… I won't have a Vice Captain just for convenience's sake. I've never been that way, and I know how to run the squad in the absence of a suitable candidate."

He smiled ruefully.

“I’ve been a Captain just as long as you have, remember.” He reminded his friend softly. “And I’ve always believed that someone who becomes a Vice Captain should be someone who one day might make a Captain.”

“Mm.” Kyouraku pursed his lips. “Sometimes that isn’t visible till they get to that point — not all great Captains were Vice Captains and not all Vice Captains will ever make good Captains. You know that as well as anyone, Ukitake — for the time being, having someone to act as an interim would probably do you good.”

“I’m not so weak and feeble that I can’t hold my own.” Ukitake rebelled against this, shaking his head. “If you asked it of me, Kyouraku, I could still pull out Bankai and fight on equal terms with any of the Captains save for Genryuusei-sensei. In fact, I’m quite sure in a number of cases I could beat them, too. Perhaps even you, you know — there’s not much to choose between us even now.”

“Oh, I’ve no doubt you’re far and away able to beat someone like me.” Kyouraku acknowledged lazily. “It’s the Captains who take themselves seriously you should be more concerned with. Come the Winter it won’t be a case of theorising, after all. We will be fighting Captains… and they’re not weak Captains, either.”

“Perhaps that’s true.” Ukitake reflected. “But either way, I’m still confident of my skills in battle and so should you be, too, if you know me as well as I think you do. I appreciate your concern, but I really don’t need it as much as you think. Just because sometimes I’m weak doesn’t mean I’m never strong.”

“What I worry about is you pulling your Bankai out against Aizen or some like radical and destroying yourself in the process.” Kyouraku said acidly, and Ukitake looked rueful.

“You could put it a little more nicely.” He chided. “Besides, I’m serious. I’m not so feeble as that. Just recent events have taken their toll. That’s all. Nothing more.”

“Well, you should still think it over.” Kyouraku advised. “A Captain’s job is to protect his squad, after all, as well as lead them. We’ve both been doing this too long to think any different.”

He reached over to clap his hand down on his friend’s shoulder.

“And I’d miss you, if you did blow yourself to extinction fighting for Seireitei.” He added lightly. “So think on that too, before you force yourself.”

He got to his feet.

“As for Kurotsuchi, so long as it’s not hurting anyone, I vote we stay out of it for now.” He added. “Spirit particle studies may be obscure but I can’t see what harm it does to Soul Society to let him continue. If it had been Soukyoku, that would’ve been one thing. But I don’t think it’s entered his mind. I was simply a nusiance he wanted rid of… nothing new about that at all.”

“Then I’ll put my faith in that and let it alone.” Ukitake agreed. “Thank you, Kyouraku. I appreciate your efforts on my behalf.”

“Well, as ever, we make a good team.” Kyouraku stretched. “But I’ve done far too much work for this early in the afternoon. You make sure you get some rest, Ukitake. I’ll be sure to be doing the same.”

So, it was the weekend.

Uryuu flopped down onto his bed, staring blankly up at the ceiling as he reflected on the past few days. On the one hand, it barely seemed to have been any time at all since he had been getting ready for school on Monday morning, yet in another way it had seemed like the longest week on the planet, and he let out his breath in a rush, wondering how much longer it was going to be before he started to feel like his old self again.

It wasn’t simply a case of his lost Quincy powers, although if he was honest he knew that he felt naked and vulnerable without them. It wasn’t even the growing strength of Kurosaki’s reiatsu, forceful and focused as he put his heart and soul into protecting Karakura from harm. Though it rankled on his pride that something he had once done so easily had been torn away from him, it was not the main focus of his concern.

He reached up his hand to his head, absently brushing a thin, pale finger against his brow and wincing involuntarily as the tip found the bruise that had slowly begun to form there. He had no recollection of the incident in Phys Ed class — neither Keigo’s reckless kick or being knocked to the ground, but even if his mind hadn’t registered it, his body had not been fooled. Fortunately, the blow had been struck in such a place that his hair would cover any swelling or marks and prevent too many questions from overly anxious enquirers, but even so, it troubled him that he could not recall the accident at all.

Or, for that matter, any of afternoon lessons from roll call till the moment that he had been hauled back to his feet in the middle of the soccer field.

He closed his eyes, as a dull ache began to throb against the base of

his skull. He was still exhausted, he realised, and even though he had not been aware of dreams the past two nights, he had risen that morning almost as tired as he had been when he had gone to bed. This sudden lack of recollection bothered him more than he liked to admit — if he could space out during the day, it was also possible that he was spacing out during the night, too. He had heard stories of sleepwalkers who, completely oblivious to their actions, had managed to slip out of their home and into trouble, and although he had never been one to indulge in such oddball behaviour, he had begun to feel that he had to consider all possibilities before dismissing them.

Was it possible to sleepwalk in the daytime? Uryuu didn't know, but he had no other explanation for why he had no memory of two and a half hours of his day.

He let out a groan, rolling over onto his stomach and resting his chin in his hands.

"Maybe Asano's kick was enough of a blow to wipe my memory of a few hours." He muttered. "Maybe it's just a concussion. Maybe…"

He trailed off, rubbing his temples.

"Maybe." He murmured.

Slowly he pulled himself into a sitting position, and then, reluctantly to his feet, padding out of the room and down the hallway to the stairs that led to the kitchen. He'd make himself a mug of hot coffee, focus on his class assignments and then he'd think about anything else afterwards. Classwork was easy and therapeutic, and something so routine and familiar was surely bound to calm his shattered nerves.

Comforted by this thought, he grabbed his school satchel from where he had uncharacteristically left it lying in the hallway, pulling it open to retrieve his maths book and the sheet of algebraic equations that the teacher had set them that morning. Dropping them down onto the unit, he poured himself a mug of steaming coffee from the still hot pot and sank down on one of the bar stools, spreading his work out in front of him.

He opened his book, flicking to the next free page in order to begin his work in his usual, neat style. As he did so, however, he froze, staring at the sheet of paper in dismay and confusion.

There, on the page before him was a neat row of equations, all worked out with perfect accuracy and impeccably neat in their appearance. The date had been underlined with scientific precision,

just like the pages and pages of mathematical equations that had come before it. But this page was different. This page was…

Slowly, Uryuu touched the paper, unable to believe his eyes.

“When did I answer these?” He murmured, a cold chill running down his spine as he contemplated the full implication of what he was seeing. “This afternoon? In class? When? Am I even able to do homework in my sleep now, too? Or… what? What is happening? What…”

He turned over the page hesitantly, smoothing it down as he ran his gaze over the last line of equations. As with the others, they were all perfectly calculated and correct.

And yet, as he reached the bottom of that sheet, he realised that there was something different about these sums. Whereas the first ones had been scribed in his own concise, precision-perfect handwriting, the ones at the bottom of the second page had been written in a different, slightly curved hand.

“Someone *else* did my homework for me?” Uryuu’s mind began racing, turning back the sheet to glance at the first sum and then back at the last. “What the…? Why would I start and someone else finish? What…”

He glanced down the sums one by one for the final time, and as he did so, his heart almost stopped in his chest.

“I *began* writing that.” He murmured. “I began, and someone else finished. But… from there to there, it’s not a clean change. Between that sum and this one, it’s gradual. Little by little, with each sum written… the handwriting has begun to change. It’s not mine, and it’s not *not* mine. It’s… something else. Something… else.”

Suddenly frightened, he pushed the book aside, hurrying towards the back of the house and pushing back the patio doors as he stepped outside for air.

“What the hell is happening to me!” He exclaimed, taking no comfort from the silent sky that gave him no answers to his questions.

As he turned slowly back towards the house, the faintest flicker of reiatsu crossed his senses and he paused, biting his lip as he struggled to work out where he had felt that sensation before. It was faint, yet distinctive, and though he couldn’t quite place it, Uryuu was certain that he’d encountered the owner at least once. It wasn’t a human’s reiatsu, yet whether or not it belonged to a Shinigami, Uryuu could not be sure.

For a moment he ruminated on it, trying to focus on it's fleeting traces. Even as he did so, though, it faded and disappeared into nothing, and Uryuu frowned, having the sudden sense that someone, somewhere had been watching him.

But whoever they were, they were gone now.

Uryuu let out a sigh, dropping down onto the ground as a sudden sense of dull realisation washed over him.

In that instant, memories flooded through him and, deep down, he knew who it was who had been watching him.

A flicker of anger and frustration curled up in his heart as he contemplated what it meant.

"Kurotsuchi Nemu." He murmured, the words little more than breath on the breeze. "And where she is… that bastard isn't far behind."

He buried his head in his hands.

"If he's out for revenge, I'm in the perfect state for him to take it." He realised. "I can't fight him again. I don't have that kind of power, or any way to get to Soul Society to confront him about it, either. To do that would mean asking either Urahara or Kurosaki for help — or both, and neither one of them is a possibility. I'm sure Urahara knows all there is to know about my current predicament and if Kurosaki realised I didn't have my Quincy powers, God knows how he'd handle it. So that means that I'm just going to have to sit it out. To wait, and see whether or not I sense Nemu's reiatsu a second time. If I can at least find her, maybe I can find out what all of this is about."

He swallowed hard, remembering the image the sadistic captain had tossed his way of his beloved Grandfather's final moments.

"And whether or not I've become just the latest in his long line of Quincy guinea-pigs."

—

Author's Note

There's Ukitake again. And Kyouraku :D You can't have one without the other… plus I had to put that jerk Kurotsuchi at least somewhat in his place. Nasty creepy little worm that he is…

Chapter Six: Inner Instinct

Chapter Six: Inner Instinct

"That's the last of it, I guess."

Renji tossed his brush aside, getting to his feet and stretching his arms over his head with a disgruntled yawn. "Shit, I don't mind gettin' up at the crack of dawn but I swear I get more muscle aches from signin' documents than I do fightin' battles. Damn, administration is boring!"

"I've put them all into the right boxes, Abarai-san." His young helper glanced up from where he was crouched on the floor, big file boxes surrounding his small form. "If that's the last section, then we're done, aren't we?"

"Yeah. Thank God." Renji grabbed up the final pile of loose sheets, glancing at them and then holding them out for the subordinate officer to take. "Careful with 'em, Rikichi. Taichou's big on everythin' in the right place an' I ain't lookin' to create more work for anyone by puttin' things in in the wrong order."

"It's all right. I've followed your instructions very carefully." The youngster assured him, taking the pile as though it was made of gold and neatly slipping it into its correct place. He reached for the box lid, placing it carefully on the top and pushing it down with a soft click. "It's all done."

He got to his feet, and despite himself Renji smirked, amusement glittering in his eyes as he observed his young companion.

Rikichi was one of 6-Bantai's more diminuitive members, though he made up for it with his cheeky attitude and his resolute dedication to duty. In fact, Renji reflected, he hadn't raised even the smallest complaint on having been dragged from the mess-hall that morning to help with filing the mundane squad paperwork that had grown almost out of control since Byakuya's incapacitation. On the contrary, he had been about pushing himself forward to volunteer, and even now, with his *hakama* so coated with dust it appeared dull grey and his hands as black as the tufty hair that covered his head, he did not seem in the least to be regretting it.

Before his fight with Byakuya, Renji had tended to see Rikichi as just another one of the younger squad members who were trying to

prove themselves as bonafide members worthy of obtaining a seated position in Kuchiki Byakuya's exhalted 6-Bantai. Not that he had ever disliked the boy — but he had never paid him more than the briefest of attention, treating him with the same general, rough camaraderie that epitomised his style as Vice Captain.

But, since he had regained consciousness to find that Rikichi had broken rules in order to help him, the young Shinigami had risen greatly in Renji's estimation. And though he was a little unnerved by the idea that any of his subordinates could have turned him into some kind of idol, he had realised that loyalty like Rikichi's was something worth holding onto and, if possible, rewarding. In the aftermath of Seireitei's betrayal, those thoughts had consolidated even further, and so he had been more than happy to involve the youngster in his work.

In truth, Renji had been glad of the help as well as the company. Although his training grades had always proved that he was far from stupid, he never been a bookworm, studying type, preferring action to administration. And, despite the fact he had passed all his examinations with among the highest grades, he knew that he'd much rather be taking the whole squad on a dangerous training mission than putting his signature to papers pertaining to boring things like munitions stock and food supplies.

"Kuchiki-taichou does a lot of work behind the scenes, doesn't he?"

"He sure as hell makes it look a shitload easier than it is, that's for certain." Renji snorted. "I guess that's noble blood for you — they must be taught how to deal with shit like that without breakin' a sweat. It's not my thing, though, I ain't ashamed to say it. Give me a sword an' a battle any day of the week. I didn't master Bankai in order to file papers."

He sighed, rubbing his cramped fingers ruefully.

"Taichou really found a good way to punish me for insubordination, you might say." He acknowledged. "If this is what bein' Captain's about, then they can keep it."

"An admirable sentiment for a Vice Captain to have, Renji."

A voice from the doorway made the two Shinigami freeze, Renji inwardly wincing as he recognised the unflappable, unmistakeable tones of his Captain.

Slowly he turned around, meeting Byakuya's impassive gaze with a sheepish one of his own.

"Taichou! I didn't realise…"

“It seems that even though your fighting prowess has increased a good deal lately, you still have a lot of work to do when it comes to multi-tasking, Fuku-Taichou.” Byakuya said meaningfully. “For you to have not sensed my coming is unforgivable, especially considering a junior member of the squad is present.”

His gaze flitted to Rikichi at this juncture, and the boy’s eyes widened at his Captain’s sudden attention. He bowed his head hastily, and Byakuya’s lips twitched into a faint smile.

“You are dismissed.” He said simply. “Thank you for your hard work.”

“Yes, Taichou.” Rikichi did not raise his head, instead shuffling towards the door with his neck still bent in respect. Once he had manoeuvred himself out of the open door, Byakuya shut it, pursing his lips thoughtfully as he did so.

“That boy seemed troubled by something.” He reflected. “Have you been trying to pass off your work onto your subordinates in my absence, Renji?”

“No, sir.” Renji shook his head, inwardly adding, ‘*although believe me I’d have liked to.*’. “He just helped put things in boxes, that’s all.”

“I see.” Byakuya frowned. “Rikichi, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.” Renji looked startled. “I didn’t realise you knew him by name.”

“Contrary to your belief, Vice Captain Abarai, I do have an awareness of the members of my squad.” Came Byakuya’s soft-spoken retort, and Renji frowned, shaking his head.

“I didn’t mean…”

“I also know that Rikichi was absent from 6-Bantai’s ranks when I returned here, after you and I settled some overriding differences on the route to Soukyoku Hill.” Byakuya said evenly, moving towards his desk and casting a glance at the specks of ink that had been accidentally dotted across the fine polished wood. “I wonder if those two things and his behaviour this morning have any kind of connection.”

“Taichou?” Renji faltered, knowing that he would not betray Rikichi for having helped him, but Byakuya offered another, faint smile.

“The boy has promise, if he can think quickly in a dangerous situation and judge how best to act.” He mused. “Loyalty too, which

you would do well to cultivate. Your actions have an impact on the people around you, after all — I trust you've come to realise that in recent weeks, Renji?"

"I…" Renji hesitated, then got a grip on himself, meeting his captain's gaze directly.

"Yes, sir." He said frankly. "I ain't as stupid as people think I am — you neither, for that matter. I'm a good Vice Captain, even if you ain't realised it yet, Taichou. An' I'll be an even better one, now I know what things I should be fightin' for."

Byakuya watched him for a moment, then he nodded his head.

"I have no doubt." He agreed. "Do you know why it is that I haven't requested for your removal as my Vice Captain since the first time you decided to tackle things on your own and without squad support?"

"I guess there ain't many Shinigami about who're qualified t'do it right now, with squads without Captains an' shit." Renji said acidly, and Byakuya shook his head.

"I don't think that I need to have a Vice Captain who is unsuitable for the job." He said dismissively. "I am Captain of 6-Bantai, and as you seem to have realised, there is plenty I can do without a Vice Captain's help. It's also true that you're still far too short sighted and you still have that to work on. I won't tolerate your foolishness or your tendency to react emotionally instead of strategically in situations, so I suspect there is still much for you to learn yet. But no. There is a very good reason why I decided to keep you as my Vice Captain, even despite your unforgivable act of raising your sword against me."

"Which was…?" Renji eyed his companion warily, and something which *might* have been the faintest flicker of amusement touched the nobleman's grey eyes.

"I see no reason to discard a Vice Captain who will one day be a Captain in his own right." He said off-handedly. "Providing he's not foolish enough to get killed in the meantime."

"Taichou…?" Renji's eyes almost fell out of his head, and Byakuya shrugged, settling himself down at his desk.

"You aren't strong enough to defeat me yet." He reflected. "But you have become stronger than I had initially realised you could be. I think that to be to 6-Bantai's advantage."

He held up his hands, as Renji gazed at him in wonder and

disbelief.

“Don’t interpret my words the wrong way, Renji. We are still worlds apart in every respect. But in the current climate, I would sooner have a Vice Captain who is of some material use than one who is not. So I have chosen to keep you. And if you truly are Captain material, time will one day tell. Doing paperwork is just one of those trials — it isn’t simply a matter of having Bankai and knowing when to use it.”

Renji offered his Captain a rueful smile, scratching his head awkwardly.

“Ah… you heard that, huh?”

“You don’t need any more combat practice at present.” Byakuya raised his gaze once more. “But you evidently need some lessons in how to deal with paperwork in a neat and concise manner. You’ve spilled ink all over my desk, after all — it seems I’ll have to find more to delegate to you in order to improve your technique.”

Renji groaned inwardly, yet he met the challenge in Byakuya’s grey eyes, shrugging his shoulders noncommittally.

“I can do it.” He said frankly. “It’s boring, but it ain’t beyond me. I’ve dealt with all the paperwork since you’ve been sick, Taichou, even since my own injuries healed. 6-Bantai are all up t’date — you can count on me.”

“So it would seem.” Byakuya gestured to the ink spots. “Do something about those, and we’ll call the matter closed.”

“Yes, Taichou.” Renji only just stifled a sigh. “By the way, are you well enough to be back here now? Rukia seemed to think…”

“Rukia has far more need to heal than I do.” Byakuya cut across him. “And I am quite fine, thank you.”

His eyes narrowed slightly.

“That is one other matter.” He added. “For the time being, I don’t want you distracting yourself from your immediate duties by spending too much time bothering my sister. Is that understood?”

“Do you mean you want me to not speak t’her?” Renji demanded. “Because it ain’t happenin’, Taichou. I’m sorry, an’ all, but I did that once already an’ look how it almost turned out. I ain’t intimidated by her bein’ in the Kuchiki-ke any more an’ I ain’t goin’ to stop being friends with her because you think I’m beneath her notice now. She an’ I, we come from the same world. With all respect, Taichou, you

don't understand that world at all. Rukia an' I are always goin' to be allies… nothin' you say is goin' to change that."

"You really are an emotional fool." Byakuya sighed heavily, apparently already bored with the subject, but Renji got the distinct impression that his Captain was only just keeping his usual calm. "I don't remember saying anything of the sort. I simply said that, for the time being, I would prefer you not to be distracting yourself from your immediate duties by spending too much time with Rukia. Is that hard to understand?"

"Sounds like you're tellin' me not t'see her to me." Renji said flatly, unable to keep the slight note of sullenness out of his voice, and Byakuya arched an eyebrow.

"Renji, I will not say this again." He said softly, a faint warning in his tones. "Rukia has to heal. So does Seireitei. You are my Vice Captain and I expect you to put that duty above anything else. I have no interest in your friendship or otherwise with Rukia. I have no interest in your inferiority complex regarding her status or your own. You are beneath me, because you are my second in command. For that reason alone I expect your obedience when I give you an order. If you spend too much time bothering her, she'll no doubt spend longer recovering her own powers and returning to her own squad. Meanwhile, you were not appointed Vice Captain so you could chase after people who are perfectly able to take care of themselves. You have subordinates like Rikichi who, for some unfathomable reason, look up to you. I would like to think that you will not let them down."

"I…" Renji opened his mouth to retort, then stopped, confused.

"Captains from Rukongai backgrounds have always been few and far between, Renji." Byakuya's voice became serious. "Even fewer who come from the kind of hole you and Rukia crawled out from. Most of Rukongai's citizens never muster enough *reiryoku* to be anything more than basic rank and file Shinigami. The odds are always against you from the very start."

"Zaraki-taichou and Hitsugaya-taichou both came from Rukongai." Renji said frankly.

"Zaraki…" Byakuya's expression became unreadable, then, "It's true that Hitsugaya Toushirou was an unusual and exceptional case. He has extremely high *reiryoku*, especially considering his Rukongai roots. But the rule is not usually so friendly to people from outside of Seireitei. You know that as well as anyone else. Your own classmates were mostly noble born, I'm sure… you were no doubt in a minority, even

then."

Renji rubbed his chin, slowly nodding his head.

"I get it." He said gruffly. "It ain't wrong — I mean, I spent most of my time at the Institute with Kira an' he was from some Seireitei family or other. Could tell it the moment I met him, cos of his manners. But it doesn't matter to me, Taichou, where I came from or where he did or, with all respect, where you did, either. It ain't about that."

"Then you'd do well to follow my advice." Byakuya said lightly. "The only thing which will prevent you one day becoming a division Captain is being easily distracted by things that should not distract you."

"So you *are* tellin' me to quit being friends with Rukia!"

"No, I'm telling you that it's high time you grew up and balanced your alliances and your position in a more adult manner." Byakuya snapped scathingly, and at the edge in his Captain's tone, Renji stared at him in surprise. In that instant he saw the faint shadows of pain that edged Byakuya's eyes, and he bit his lip.

So the guy *wasn't* fit, after all. He was just forcing himself to come back, because he didn't want to sit back and think about what he had almost allowed to happen on Soukyoku Hill. In that moment, a rare burst of perception flooded Renji's heart, and he understood the real reason for his Captain's frustration. He had taken Ichimaru's sword, but even that was not reparation enough for having betrayed his position as Rukia's brother.

"It must be difficult to see me and know I'm not her. She's dead, and he can't get her back. And he fought his whole family to have her, but he only had her for five years. He's had me for forty, and fought his family over that, too — yet no matter how much he does for me, it can't turn back time and bring my sister back."

Rukia's words echoed through his thoughts at that moment, and he frowned, leaning up against the wall of the Captain's office as he digested what he had learnt carefully.

"Taichou, I don't think Rukia's pissed about what happened. With either of us… I think she's put it behind her and moved on already." He said, knowing the moment the words left his mouth that he had said the wrong thing, for Byakuya's expression darkened and Renji could see the first signs of a storm brewing in the depths of those grey eyes.

“I don’t think that’s your concern.” He said stiffly. “I’m not talking about Rukia’s position, or my own. I’m talking about yours. I am not blind, Renji. As I said, I understand far more about my squad than you seem to realise. I know what your feelings are regarding my sister, and have done for a long time. Why else did I take you to the Real World to arrest her? To test your conviction in the position assigned you when faced with the downfall of someone you knew? You failed that test, in the end.”

“Damn good thing I did.” Renji muttered. “Else Rukia might’ve been fried alive by that stupid great bird.”

“*Whatever* the final outcome in this instance,” Byakuya’s eyes glittered with a warning that he would not tolerate any further interruptions. “A Captain must be able to put his own feelings aside when upholding the rules. That was, after all, the main reason why I imprisoned you after you fought the Kurosaki boy on your own whim. There is no place in Seireitei for people who act only on their emotions.”

Renji frowned, but did not respond, and Byakuya nodded, resting his arms on the desk as he continued in his low, cultured tones.

“I’m not fooled, either, by your claims of simple friendship where Rukia is concerned.” He said simply. “I am well aware of the past you two shared and the bond between you when you first both crossed my path.”

“I guess it’s no secret we grew up more like family.” Renji acknowledged.

“Family?” Byakuya’s lips thinned, and he shook his head. “You forget that I have been a married man, once, and that I know what it means to cross the divide between Seireitei’s noble clans and the Rukongai masses. Rukia may or may not have grown up with you, but she is a Kuchiki now, and there are some lines which must not be crossed. You have no concept of the pain that crossing them can cause. And you are not in my position. If you fall, Renji, you fall alone.”

Horror flooded Renji’s expression, followed by confusion and embarrassment as he struggled to comprehend what his Captain had just said.

“Taichou, I don’t… if you… Rukia and… if… it’s not…” He spluttered, and Byakuya snorted, shaking his head in contempt.

“I thought you at least had the intelligence to be honest with

yourself, if not with me." He said derisively. "But evidently you haven't even got that far. Very well, then. I'll save this warning for a time when you're more prepared to deal with it. But I am quite serious, Renji. If you become a Captain, you will have status and position equal to that of any of the Gotei 13 Captains. But if you fall — and if you cross those boundaries, no doubt you *will* fall — you will be on your own. You do not have a noble family to pick up your pieces — remember it and take it to heart."

Renji's expression became sullen once more, and he shook his head.

"I don't want any noble family, and it's not like that — Taichou, what you think is wrong. Rukia and I grew up together, it ain't anything else than that." He said firmly, although even as he said it he wondered if he was telling the whole truth. "I don't need to be picked up… an' I ain't worried about boundaries an' lines. Since I began this, I've decided that I'll go so far as I can an' not care if people have better backgrounds or manners or *reiryoku* than me. An' I mean to keep that up. Even if you don't like it — well, it's jus' my way of doin' things."

"You and that Kurosaki boy are insufferably alike." Byakuya sighed, rubbing his temples, and Renji stared at him indignantly.

"Taichou! How am I like him? Dammit, give me some credit!"

"I think I probably just did." Was Byakuya's cryptic response. "All right. Enough of this. I've been away far too long and you have a desk to clean. I must go and make sure nothing else has been permanently vandalised in my absence — I'll leave the cleaning up in here to you."

With that he was gone, leaving Renji staring after him.

Handicrafts Club was quiet that evening.

Uryuu set aside his book, casting a glance around the classroom at the small gathering of students that were clustered around this desk or that, each hell-bent on this or that project. It was a sunny day outside, and in his heart Uryuu guessed that the fine weather had lured away some of the club's less devoted members.

His gaze strayed absently to the seat across the aisle where Orihime usually sat, and a strange sensation clenched inside of his chest as he realised that she too had taken the evening off. For a moment he felt angry at her for having so easily discarded her obligations in order to play hooky in the sun, but then he caught himself, shaking his head as he berated his own transparent reaction. The truth of it was that Inoue

Orihime had always been one of the few people who had bothered to speak to him during club sessions, and aside from the intermittent stream of people who wanted this item or that stitched back together with his undoubtedly superior skill, most of his fellows tended to leave him well alone.

Normally this didn't bother him, since he had never come to the club to make friends. Rather it was an opportunity to avoid the house on the one evening that his father Ryuuken had a bad habit of coming home from work, and even the lonely silence of the classroom was better than the cold, tense atmosphere that lingered in the house whenever the two men of the Ishida family were forced within the same four walls. Yet, even though that was the case, since the summer Uryuu had found himself distinctly missing being in the continuous company of other people his own age. And the more he reflected on it, the more it bothered him.

Inoue-san did say that we were friends, and that Soul Society bonded us all together in some way. But even so, despite that, there's no need for us to speak to each other all the time.

Uryuu frowned, wishing that he had the conviction to lie to himself convincingly.

Besides, at the moment, there's noone who can help me and the last thing I need is their involvement. Bad enough Inoue-san found me at the park. If it had been anyone else, they'd probably have come to all kinds of conclusions about it, and I'd find myself in the middle of a thousand questions.

He shook his head, inwardly resolving himself that his line of thought was right.
Better this way. Better that I have my own space. After all, Shinigami and Quincy don't mix. And Inoue-san is Kurosaki's friend.

He snorted, shaking his head slightly as he forced himself to face the truth.

Inoue-san ***likes*** *Kurosaki. I can feel it, pricking at her reiatsu like a fly buzzing to get out from behind glass. Only a completely dense idiot wouldn't be able to notice… but I guess Kurosaki's that, after all.*

He narrowed his eyes, adjusting his spectacles absently on his nose as he spent a few moments inwardly poking holes in his Shinigami classmate's abilities. It was weak, he knew that, and beneath his Quincy pride. But even so, pride or otherwise, sometimes it was hard to forget that he was, after all, still just a teenage boy and that although he had not invited it, teenage angst seemed keen to set up

home within his brain like it or not. And whether he admitted it to himself or otherwise, he knew that *he* was really the one trapped like a fly, unable to find a way through this tangled swirl of emotions and regain his usual distanced objectivity.

When had his classmates stopped being objects that passed through his line of vision and started becoming people, anyway?

He sighed, returning to his original train of thought.

*Inoue-san **is** part of Kurosaki's little clique. Like Sado-kun and Arisawa-san and those pair of idiots Kojima and Asano. She's one of **his** friends, and she was before all of this began. That doesn't automatically mean I should count on her to be the same to me, whatever she says. She'll always be on his side, after all — it's just the way things are. Even if we **were** thrown together in Soul Society — it doesn't mean a thing beyond that. And noone could really call Kurosaki and I friends — whatever we fought as when we were there. We're just two completely different people — there's no way it would ever work.*

He glanced up at the clock, tapping his feet restlessly beneath the desk as he watched the second hand tick slowly around towards the twelve. It was a little after half five, and although he had plenty of odds and ends inside of his desk to be working on, somehow his focus kept sliding away from him every time he thought about beginning. In fact, after having snagged a whole line of stitches at the start of the session, he had pretty much given up and gone back to his book, half-hoping that someone would arrive to break the monotony.

But noone had, and somehow, without Orihime, the club seemed even more dull than usual.

He frowned, disapproval flooding his senses as he realised where his thoughts were once more heading. It didn't matter whether or not Inoue Orihime was in the classroom, he told himself fiercely. It had no connection whatsoever to whether or not he was bored, or whether of late he had been sleeping badly or losing his mind. It had absolutely no connection to the fleeting reiatsu of a Soul Society Vice Captain and the possibility that he was somehow involved in some remote experiment on the part of that damn sadist, Kurotsuchi Mayuri. All of these things were far more pressing on his mind at that moment than the whereabouts of his classmate, and he scolded himself once more for allowing his thoughts to wander back in her direction.

They had done it far too often recently for his liking, after all.

He glanced at the clock, noticing with little interest that the clock had progressed a further two minutes since the last time he had

examined it.

It was no good. At this rate, he was going to wind up losing to his own thought processes, and with his concentration as poor as it currently was, there was always the risk of him fixing something for someone and making a mistake. That would be intolerable, since he had always prided himself on his neat, concise stitchwork, and at this he got to his feet, scooping up his bag and sliding his book into it.

Noone looked up from their work as he left the classroom, and he made no attempt to say goodbye to anyone either, not caring whether or not they noticed his absence. He had never bothered too much about friends, after all. They were complicated things which rarely understood the spiritual demands his chosen vocation placed on his body and his lifestyle, and he had had enough over the years of being singled out. It was better to be ignored. He was the last Quincy, after all. There was no reason for his classmates to understand the pressures of upholding an entire people's pride.

Yet somehow, being on his own now stung a lot more than it had before.

He pushed open the door of the school building, stepping out into the sunlight and feeling the soft, gentle touch of a light breeze touch his skin. Somehow it seemed to refresh his tired senses a little, and for a moment he just stood there, enjoying the brief sensation of freedom and relaxation.

"Hey, don't just space out in the middle of the steps, idiot."

A rough voice came from behind him, followed by a hefty shove and he stumbled, dropping his school bag and almost falling headlong down the flight of stone stairs to the courtyard below. Regaining his balance with all of his normal grace and nimbleness he swung around, light glinting angrily off his glasses as he confronted his disgruntled assailant. Behind him, he saw, the culprits were a group of third year students, none of them heftily built but all of them more stocky and tall than he was on his own. Still, he was annoyed, and he was not about to back down and run away with his tail between his legs.

"Hey! It doesn't hurt to say excuse me, you know." He said stiffly. "Shoving someone out of the way isn't polite."

"Nor is spacing out in a public place, you moron." The leader of the third years retorted, in a tone which clearly said he had no time for first years getting in his way. "Take this one as a warning, four eyes. You're lucky I ain't got time to spend playing with you today — but next time you'll be going flying for real."

With that he and his companions barged past, leaving Uryuu visibly bristling at the off-handedness of their attack.

“Jerks.” He muttered, pushing his glasses further up his nose. “Thinking they own the school just because they’re in their final year.”

He retrieved his fallen bag from the bottom of the steps, dusting it off and examining it for any sign of damage. There was none, however, and he let out his breath in a rush.

Ryuuken would be at home, so there was no way he was going straight there. That left one other possibility, and as he reached the school gates he turned left, making his way along the pathway towards the big Karakura library.

If he couldn’t focus on handicrafts, maybe he’d have better luck with his studies.

As he reached the end of the street, however, someone called his name, and he turned, surprise glittering in his blue eyes as he registered Orihime waving to him from the end of the road. She was alone, the bag in her hand indicating that she’d been to the supermarket to buy her dinner, and Uryuu eyed her in confusion. She had already changed out of her school uniform, and somehow, in the casual wear of everyday and with her long red hair trailing out behind her in the slight breeze, his classmate looked even more attractive than usual. With a jolt he realised that she was wearing the pink top that he had tailored for her when they had left Soul Society. Something about this fact struck him, and he bit his lip, hoping against hope that his normally pale complexion was not flooding with colour at his line of thought.

“I… Inoue-san.” At last he found his voice, twisting his features into what he hoped was an acceptable expression of greeting. For a moment he had been staring at her, after all, and inwardly he cringed, hoping she hadn’t noticed. Not that it was unusual for guys to stare at her, he reflected bitterly. It was such a popular pastime that, if they had approached the school board about it, the guys in first year could probably have set up an official after-school society. But unlike most of his class, Uryuu had not been staring at the size of her chest or the way that her body moved as she ran back along the pavement. More he had been staring at her face, and most of all, the sparkling warmth that glittered in her big, violet-grey eyes.

With a tremendous effort, he forcibly stopped his thought processes before they could take him into any more dangerous territory. If he

continued in this line, after all, he knew that there would be no stopping his blushes, and then the girl would be asking him questions that he wasn't prepared to answer, even to himself.

"I didn't expect to run into anyone walking this way." Orihime hurried across the road to join him, taking no notice of the fact the light had turned red and that traffic was beginning to move along the road towards her. A couple of drivers beeped their horns, but Orihime seemed oblivious, a grin on her pretty features as she reached her classmate. "Didn't you go to Handicrafts club tonight either?"

"It was quiet, so I was going to go to the library." Uryuu took a firm grip on his wits, offering her a stiff, awkward smile as he made himself meet her gaze. "You had shopping to do, Inoue-san?"

"Yes." Orihime nodded. "I remembered in Japanese Literature class that I'd bought nothing for this evening and I really had to get something, so I decided it would be okay if I missed the club just the once. I have to eat, after all — eating's important when you're a growing girl."

She eyed him curiously.

"You were going to the library?"

"Yes." Ishida adjusted his glasses once more, wishing that his normal acerbic composure had not deserted him. What had bitten him that afternoon he didn't know, but it felt alien and unnatural, and he forced it to the back of his mind, struggling to focus back on the conversation at hand. "To finish off my assignments for next week."

"You're so organised." Orihime sighed heavily. "I never think about an assignment until it's practically due in, and then I'm working till all hours finishing it off."

"But you finished third on the end of term tests last term." Uryuu objected. "You must study quite a lot too, Inoue-san."

"Maybe." Orihime shrugged in her usual, happy-go-lucky way. "Exams aren't really so hard, but assignment deadlines are easy to forget about, that's all."

She offered him a smile.

"You don't look so tired today, Ishida-kun. Are you feeling better?"

"Inoue-san, I don't think I ever said that I was unwell." Uryuu said hurriedly. "And for that matter, you don't need to keep asking me questions like that. People think it's odd, and there's no need. I'm all right."

“I heard that Asano-kun kicked a ball at your head on Friday.” Orihime did not seem to be fully listening to him. “So I wondered if you had a concussion. I had one of those once, and I could hear ringing in my ears for weeks afterwards. Plus, I started seeing all kinds of funny things — I wondered if maybe that had happened to you too. Especially considering what happened in the park the other day…”

“I’m fine.” Uryuu said quietly, and Orihime shrugged.

“Then that’s good.” She said lightly. “The library’s on the way to my place. Do you mind if I walk with you? I don’t like walking on my own, it’s nicer to have someone to talk to.”

“I… er… I don’t suppose it matters.” Uryuu replied, swallowing hard as he distinctly felt his heart miss a beat.
*Dammit, what’s **wrong** with me today? Why can’t I even have a conversation with the girl now?*

“Then it’s decided.” Orihime responded lightly. “I’m glad. Since we went to Soul Society and came back, it feels like everyone’s doing their own thing a lot.”

“Everyone has their own lives to go back to, after all. Even Kuchiki-san, in the end.”

“I suppose so.” Orihime sighed. “I suppose I thought that when we came back it’d be easier to all just be friends, that’s all. Before it all began, you see, I didn’t have many friends who were boys.”

She pinkened.

“For some reason, guys don’t often look me in the eye when they talk to me, and it’s sort of creepy.” She added, unaware of how uncomfortable she was making her companion by such a carefree admission. “But when I was in Soul Society, it was different. Kurosaki-kun isn’t like that, and nor are you or Sado-kun. And it was nice, because I always thought I should have more friends who were boys — like Tatsuki-chan does.”

She shrugged, grinning.

“Now I do, and it’s kinda cool to have boy friends and girl friends. So I wanted to spend more time getting to know people and stuff. You know? Because in Soul Society we all made a really good team.”

“In Soul Society we had a goal, and we achieved it.” Uryuu said matter-of-factly. “We achieved it, and now things are going back to normal. It’s perfectly natural that way, Inoue-san.”

“I thought if we were all together, we might find a way to get your

powers back too." Orihime admitted, and Uryuu flinched, eying her in dismay as he interpreted the sympathy in her gaze.

"Don't say that so loudly." He snapped, more riled than he cared to admit by her gentle pity. "Besides, there's nothing you or anyone else can do about it. It's a Quincy problem. It's not something you'd understand — and it's definitely not something that Kurosaki would understand, either. It's not any of your business… it's my problem and it's for me to solve it."

As soon as the words had left his mouth he regretted them, the regret deepening as he saw a look of hurt and dismay flood Orihime's features. She faltered, eying him uncertainly, and Uryuu berated himself fiercely for the hundredth time that day, inwardly wishing he had the easy gift of socialising that some of his classmates had. An uncomfortable silence descended over them, and at length, Orihime lowered her gaze.

"I'm sorry, Ishida-kun. I was poking my nose in where it didn't belong." She said timidly, and Uryuu's heart lurched in his chest as he registered the penitence in her voice.

He opened his mouth to assure her that the fault had been his, but before the words could come out something struck across his senses, turning his attention to the south.

It was faint, and fairly feeble, but it was unmistakeable. The reiatsu of a Hollow, somewhere in the direction of the town park.

"Ishida-kun…?" Orihime's voice was soft, and Uryuu could tell she had sensed it too. Her fingers began to stray to her hairclips, and as he saw them glitter, a flicker of fear merged with protective instinct surged across Uryuu's senses. It was only a weak hollow, true enough, but he had seen Orihime's lack of killer instinct on more than one occasion before. Hesitation now could result in the girl being hurt or killed, and even lacking in power as he was, he couldn't let that happen.

He knew, after all, that Orihime's own brother Sora had once been a Hollow. And Orihime's caring heart most likely connected each Hollow's rampage with her brother's pained cry for her attention. She was that kind of person, who thought deeply about other people's feelings more than she did her own safety. And that kind of sentimental foolishness was completely inappropriate when faced with a monster that had long ago lost its human heart.

At this thought, Uryuu made up his mind.

“Take your shopping home.” He said sharply. “If Kurosaki’s a Shinigami worth his salt, he’ll be on the spot to deal with it before you know it.”

“But…”

“You heard what I said!”

“It’s coming this way.” Orihime murmured. “Ishida-kun, I can’t disappear and leave you on your own. You might hate being protected, but you can’t fight a Hollow right now. And I don’t sense Kurosaki-kun’s reiatsu yet. There’s just me. So I… I have to. I have to fight.”

“Over my dead body will I let you do that.” The words came out before Uryuu could stop them, and as they did, he felt something peculiar surging up inside of him. “Stand back, I said.”

He fumbled in his pocket for the tubes of spirit power he had sealed when he had been in Soul Society, inwardly cursing as he realised he had managed to leave them at home. “It’s only a weak Hollow, after all.”

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than a terrible scream rent through the air and the atmosphere around them warped and twisted to reveal the deformed body of their would-be target. Instinctively Uryuu pushed Orihime behind him, knowing even as he did so that no amount of killer instinct alone would be able to destroy a spiritual entity. Yet he stood his ground, his grip tightening on his school bag as he prepared to wield it as a weapon.

“Noone invited you here!” He exclaimed, as the white-masked beast flexed its claws, prowling towards him and lowering its immense head so that it was close enough for Uryuu to feel its choking, fetid breath on his face. He coughed, and the Hollow laughed, stretching its arm and knocking the Quincy flying with what could only be described as a glancing blow.

“I’m not interested in you, boy.” It said disparagingly, sweeping its long, spined tail in his direction and Uryuu gasped as the hard, bony structure made contact with his midriff, sending him rolling helter skelter across the hard ground. “My business is with the delicious soul of the woman you’re trying to protect.”

“Ishida-kun!” Orihime screamed, the light of her hairclips glittering into life and Uryuu struggled to his feet, darting back towards the Hollow with his bag raised above his head. He clattered it against the Hollow’s head with a cry of anger, knocking the creature off-balance

and sending its attack just wide of Orihime's arm. Breathing heavily, and with blood already beginning to trickle from numerous scratch wounds all over his body, he readied himself for a second assault. But, even as he did so, the Hollow let out a tremendous shriek, wheeling its immense tail back in his direction once more.

This time it made direct contact with his body and, as his feet lost contact with the ground, he realised that he had been sent physically flying through the air. Without his Quincy power to support him, he was no more useful than a rag doll, and as he crashed back down against the ground, the burning pain of impact shot through his limbs, causing him to feel giddy and sick with pain.

As his consciousness drained out of him, he was sure he heard Orihime scream his name, sounding impossibly far away. Then his eyes closed, and he knew no more.

Author's Note

I guess Byakuya's not generally given to being that straight-forward with people, and Renji's probably not usually quite so familiar towards his Captain. But considering they tore chunks from one another in battle once, I figure a few things have changed around. Besides, Byakuya and Renji and Rukia and the whole crossing the divide and forming an unsuitable relationship is relevant to what the hell is going on in the plot, so hopefully people will let it go ;)

Chapter Seven: The Princess & the Dragon

Chapter Seven: The Princess and the Dragon

At the exact moment Uryuu's body was mercilessly tossed against the concrete like nothing more than a sack of straw, Orihime felt her heart freeze in her chest. As though the world around her had been swallowed up in slow motion, she struggled to draw breath into her lungs, fear choking her airways and making it hard for her to form rational thoughts. Within her brain, scattered impulses were sending garbled messages from one nerve centre to another, paralysing her movement and causing her to be rooted to the spot even as the beast turned its attention back towards her.

What if Ishida-kun is dead? What will Kurosaki-kun say to me if I let a Hollow kill Ishida-kun like that?

The Hollow was bigger than the last one she'd seen, with a flat, squat head and spines protruding from its shoulders in a ridge not unlike a lizard. As it turned it's back on the defeated Uryuu, it raised it's head in the air, opening its humungous mouth and letting out a spine-splitting bellow that chilled Orihime right to the bone.

It's coming back for me. It's going to eat me now — it's going to suck out my soul — Kurosaki-kun, help!

The beast pawed at the ground, great tail slashing from side to side against the buildings that flanked the street. It was preparing itself, she knew. In a confined street with few avenues of escape, it had plenty of time with which to ready itself for the kill, yet even despite that fact Orihime found herself unable to move.

Why am I so useless — why can't I ever do anything right?

This road was a side road, with a busy traffic intersection at the furthest end that even now, oblivious to the peril just round the corner, cars were zooming by, workers heading home after a long day at the office. The Hollow stood between her and this avenue of escape, yet even had she been able to remember how to move her legs, she knew she could not just abandon Uryuu to his fate. After all, if she escaped, the Hollow would still sate its appetite on its other prey. At that moment it was showing Uryuu no interest whatsoever, but Orihime was clever enough to realise that it had simply pitched its hopes on the person with the highest reiatsu first.

Kurosaki-kun isn't here, and Ishida-kun got hurt. People always get hurt around me — as usual, I made things worse!

She swallowed hard, the thoughts firing thick and fast through her mind as she struggled to gather her wits. Her gaze flitted to Uryuu once more, willing him to get up so that they could flee together and find Ichigo, but he made no attempt to move, and Orihime knew that he had been knocked clean out by the force of the blow.

I should call an ambulance… maybe his brain is damaged — he looks so still! But he's bleeding — I can see it from here. Doesn't that mean he's still alive, if he's bleeding?

"What's wrong, girlie? Are you just going to stand there and let me eat you?" The Hollow seemed to sense her uncertainty, taunting her with a cold, mocking laugh. "You really are a boring meal, if that's the case. At least scream for me, why don't you? I like to be entertained by my food."

Why didn't I stop it? Why didn't I just call out Tsubaki — hell, what's wrong with me?

Orihime clenched and unclenched her fists, her throat dry as she contemplated what she could do. Even if she and her classmate could have escaped, she realised that taking the Hollow into the city further might put people at risk, and though she could sense the faint hint of Ichigo's reiatsu, he was still not close enough to their location to prevent the monster from doing serious harm to the buildings and the local people.

I can't rely on Kurosaki-kun to save me all the time. Ishida-kun has no powers but he still tried to protect me.

Orihime's fists clenched more tightly, her nails digging deeply into the flesh of her palm as she gathered her scattered wits. There was only one course of action, and no matter how she looked at it, there was only one thing she could do. If Uryuu was to live, heck, if *she* was to live — she had only one path she could take.

I have to fight. ***I have to fight****!*

This final thought seemed to rally her and, resolution settling in her grey eyes, she put her fingers once more to her head, willing the tiny lives of her *ShunShun Rikka* to awaken and surround her.

"Tsubaki-kun!" She exclaimed. "I need you — Tsubaki-kun, please come out!"

"I'm already here and waiting, woman — what are you hollering

about?" A flash of light accompanied by a grunt or two flitted past her ear and relief touched Orihime's heart as she saw her tiny warrior take form before her in the sky.

"I need you to take out the Hollow for me. I have to help Ishida-kun, and every second counts."

"Then stop babbling and fire me already." Tsubaki was already priming himself for flight. "Send Ayame and Shun'ou to piece together your friend and let me take care of business — you dawdle too much as it is, an' if you don't want that thing to bite your silly little head off, stop talkin' and start fighting."

"I can't use Ayame and Shun'ou right now. I want to focus all my strength on you — on getting this right." Orihime told him. "Don't let me down, Tsubaki-kun. I'm counting on you!"

"Like it'll be me doing the letting down if you miss." Came the disparaging reply, and despite the fighter's rudeness, Orihime grinned, tightening her grasp on him as she nodded her head.

"Thanks, Tsubaki-kun." She murmured. "I'm glad I have you to help me at times like this."

"Oh, quit it with the mushy shit, for God's sake." Tsubaki grimaced at her. "Just fire me already, woman — you were the one who said we were in a hurry."

"Right." Orihime focused her thoughts on the battle once more, loosing her grip on him as she prepared herself to release the spell. Though there were always doubts at the back of her mind, she cast a fleeting glance at Ishida's fallen body, and her resolution hardened within her.

"Tsubaki, *Koten-Zanshun*!" She exclaimed, as the Hollow bore down on her once more, letting out a battle shriek as he reached out his clawed hands to grab her body.

"*Watashi wa kyozetsu suru*!"

With a flash of light, Tsubaki shot across the street, and Orihime momentarily closed her eyes, wishing and praying with all her heart and soul that her attack was strong enough to bring down the enemy in one quick blow. Though she had never liked the idea of destroying anything, this was a desperate situation, and she said a silent apology to her dead brother as she willed Tsubaki to fight with all his might.

As the small light-shrouded missile swept across the sky, the Hollow let out a yell of irritation, swiping its hands towards it as

though to ward the attack away. It was to no avail, however, as for once Tsubaki's cutting edge and his mistress's determination were on the same page and, as Tsubaki's blades made contact with the Hollow's mask, Orihime was aware of a sudden swell and then splitting of the enemy's reiatsu as it let out a horrific screech of pain and defeat.

Slowly Orihime opened her eyes, just in time to see the last shadowy fragments of the Hollow fade and disappear into nothing. Despite herself, tears touched her eyes.

"I'm sorry if it hurt." She murmured softly. "I hope it won't do, any more."

"What are you babbling about now, woman?" Tsubaki flew gracefully back towards her, stretching his wings as he eyed her quizzically. "You fired a damn good shot, for once — why do you look like you're about to blub?"

"Because it's sad, when something becomes a Hollow and you can't help it go back." Orihime responded. "That's all."

"You really do talk crap." Tsubaki snorted. "Well? I thought you had to glue your friend back together? Or are you going to moon about a dead Hollow all day?"

"I hadn't forgotten." Orihime shook her head. "Thank you, Tsubaki-kun. Return now."

Tsubaki let out a grunt which may or may not have been an acknowledgement of her words, before disappearing into glittering shards of light and returning to his sleeping position.As he did so, Orihime turned her attention to her injured friend who still lay motionless on the ground.

"Ishida-kun?"

Orihime knelt down beside the still form, hesitant and unsure as she reached out a tentative finger to touch his arm. He lay quite silent on the ground, his eyes closed, and instinctively Orihime glanced around her for his missing glasses, somehow quelling the panic that surged up inside of her by forcing her mind to focus on something mundane and every day.

They lay a few feet from his collapsed body, and as she reached across to scoop them up, she registered the savage twisting of the metal and the long, jagged crack that had seared across the middle of the left lens. She bit her lip, gently laying them down at her friend's side.

“I hope you have a spare pair, Ishida-kun.” She murmured. “I remember you said you really don’t see too good without them, and these are all smashed up.”

She bit her lip, glancing at the spectacles once more, then back at her fallen friend, and she let out a sob-like laugh.

“What am I doing, muttering about broken glasses when you’re hurt?” She reprimanded herself. “I’m sorry, Ishida-kun. I’m being stupid. I’ll help you… I promise.”

Her fingers twitched towards her hairgrips, and, as she murmured the now familiar call to arms for her *Rikka* shield, she found herself faintly comforted by the faint glow that, little by little began to surround Uryuu’s crumpled body.

As it did so, a faint murmur came from his lips, and Orihime let out an exclamation, shuffling closer to him as she tried to make out his words.

“Ishida-kun? It’s Inoue Orihime. Can you hear me? You got hurt by a Hollow, but its all right… it’s all right. I’m going to heal you right up, and then you’ll be fine.”

Another murmur, then slowly her companion’s eyes flickered open, and Orihime felt thin fingers reach out to grasp her sleeve.

“Ayame! Shun’ou! Pull back a moment!” She instructed, as the glittering forms of her *Rikka* companions swooped around the fallen Quincy’s head. “I think he wants to speak to me.”

“N… ji?” The word was indistinct, and even as Orihime drew closer, she found that it was hard to make out what her friend was saying.

“Say it again, Ishida-kun?” She asked softly. “I’m listening. I told you I would, after all — just I can’t hear you very well, that’s all. Please, try and say it again and I’ll listen extra hard.”

There was a moment of silence, as Uryuu’s confused blue eyes shifted from the sky to her face, disorientated and unfocused as they struggled to find an anchor. Impulsively Orihime grasped her classmate’s hands, squeezing them tightly.

“That’s it. Look at me.” She commanded. “I know I’m probably a bunch of fuzzy blobs at the moment, but your glasses are broken, so you’ll just have to believe me when I tell you that it’s me. Okay? I’m going to heal you, so you don’t need to worry. I’ll heal you and then Kurosaki-kun won’t need to find out that you got attacked at all. All

right? I still owe you for Soul Society after all. And you guys are always so big on repaying every debt, so I'll repay mine to you here. Okay?"

At her words, something seemed to change in Uryuu's expression, and the confused blue eyes suddenly snapped into focus, a strange expression glittering faintly in their depths. For a moment he stared at her, then he tightened his hands around her own, using the grip to pull himself into a sitting position. The sudden strength of his gesture took Orihime offguard, and she let out a shriek as she almost fell headlong on top of his dusty body.

"Ishida-kun! Be careful! You'll pull my arms off!" She exclaimed, hurriedly detaching herself from his grasp as she rubbed her wrists absently. "That hurt! Though if you can pull yourself up like that still, I guess you must be better than I thought… so that's a good thing."

She smiled.

"Ayame, Shun'ou — I guess we don't need you right now after all." She added, glancing up at the *Rikka* fairies as she did so. "It looks like your job here is done. Return now — and thank you both."

"You're welcome, Orihime-san." Shun'ou assured her, as the two small beings did as they were bidden, returning to their place within the girl's aqua-blue hairslides with a twinkle of light.

Uryuu blinked a couple of times, reaching up to rub his eyes with his fists.

"I can't see." He murmured, and Orihime bit her lip.

"Your glasses got mangled. I think you — or something — fell on them." She said apologetically, pushing them towards him. "But you have a spare pair, right? Maybe not with you, but if I took you home…?"

"Glasses?" Uryuu lowered his hands, gazing at his companion in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I…" Orihime's brow furrowed. "Ishida-kun, are you feeling all right? You got knocked back pretty hard, after all… and you hit your head. You were unconscious when I got to you, so maybe you've got a concussion. Maybe I do need Ayame and Shun'ou after all. Maybe…"

She faltered, as Uryuu reached across to touch her face, his fingers brushing against the ends of her long reddish hair.

"Ishida-kun?"

“I’m all right.” He said gruffly. “That damn Hollow got lucky, is all. It caught me unarmed and off-guard. But you took it down — did you? I think I… I felt it. Somehow. Your spell.”

“I used Tsubaki.” Orihime agreed, confusion clear on her face. “It was only a low level one, else I probably couldn’t have done it.”

“I sensed the light shooting across the street and I knew what it was.” Uryuu murmured softly, his fingers tucking the sleek lock of hair behind her ear. “I think it must’ve been that sensation that brought me round. Who’d have thought you’d wind up protecting me, when I intended to protect you.”

“I…” Orihime hesitated, then, “Ishida-kun, why are you playing with my hair? It’s sort of making me uncomfortable, even if you do have a concussion. Is it because you’re mad I protected you? I know you don’t like being protected, but…”

“Why would I be annoyed?” Uryuu seemed surprised, getting to his feet and holding out his hand to lift Orihime to hers. “You came in the nick of time. And you’re as good a shot as ever. Though I should know better than to take your skills for granted, after all this time.”

“My… skills?” Orihime murmured. “I really don’t know what… I mean Tsubaki… it was just a basic Hollow, so I was able to…”

“Whatever it was, it seems to have hurt my eyes somehow.” Uryuu cut across her, reaching up to touch his face with a dark grimace. “My vision’s blurry, and I don’t think it’s from a blow to the head. Tell me, am I bleeding somewhere on my face? It doesn’t feel like it, but…”

“I told you. Your glasses got broken.” Now Orihime was anxious. “Ishida-kun, you sound strange. Really strange, I mean. Stop it — please. You’re freaking me out… I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Ishida…” Uryuu’s brow creased, and he sent her a puzzled glance. “Why would you call me that, all of a sudden? And that, of all names? Is it some kind of game you’re playing with me — I don’t understand.”

“A game I’m playing with you…?” Orihime echoed, and Uryuu nodded, reaching out a grimy finger to shape the two characters of his first name in the dust on the ground.

“You *know* my name.” He said softly. “Use it, please.”

“Use…” Orihime trailed off, her eyes widening as she glanced at the two roughly scraped kanji — *Rain* and *Dragon* — then back up at her dishevelled classmate. An odd glimmer in his deep blue eyes put her

on edge, and she frowned, having the distinct sense that something was badly wrong.

“Will you tell me what’s going on? I don’t understand, Ishida-kun. I really…”

“Didn’t you hear me?” Ishida cut across her, running his hand across the kanji in the dirt and smudging them until they became unrecognisable. “Don’t call me that. I mean it.”

“But… you want me to call you… by your *given* name?” Orihime swallowed hard, her cheeks pinkening as she understood the unfamiliar intent in his tones.
*Was he **flirting** with her? Had he hit his head so hard that it had made him act this way, or was it something else?*

Her mind raced as she considered all the reasons why her awkward, often acerbic classmate might suddenly have changed his manner towards her, and she swallowed again, struggling to keep a hold of her composure under the intense scrutiny of his indigo gaze.

“But why *now*?” She managed. “Why would you ask me to do that, all of a sudden?”

“What do you mean, all of a sudden?” Ishida eyed her in confusion. “Stop this, Niji, please. Whatever it is you’re trying to do, it’s not funny. It was a close call, that time. Hollows are always dangerous opponents — even if you want to lighten the atmosphere, it’s no time to be joking around.”

“Niji?” A chill ran up Orihime’s spine as she registered what he’d called her. “Did you… you just said… *Niji*?”

“Maybe *you’re* the one who’s concussed.” Uryuu offered her a rakish smile, which only added to Orihime’s unease. “Are you sure he didn’t whack you when you were taking him down? You don’t seem hurt, but I can’t see so damn clearly like this, and all I can make out is your hair… and your eyes…”

His smile widened.

“Not that it matters to me whether I can see you or not.” He murmured, reaching across to cup her face in his hands, and, struck motionless by the suddenness of his movement, Orihime could only stare at him, bewildered. “That you’re safe and sound is all that matters to me.”

Before Orihime knew what was happening, he had moved his head close to hers, and her heart began to race as she realised that he

intended to kiss her.

“Ishida-kun, please…” She began, but any protests she might have made were stifled as he put his lips to hers, slipping his arms around her shoulders as he held her close to him.

“Ishida! What the *hell* are you doing?!”

A voice broke them apart, and Orihime drew a ragged breath into her lungs, her hand going to her chest as she glanced from Uryuu to the intruder, her thoughts racing and fragmented in no particular order. The suddenness of the kiss had taken her off guard, as had Uryuu’s uncharacteristic forwardness but, as she struggled to calm down, she found that one thing bothered her more than those things. The fact that he had called her Niji — the word she had clearly heard him say in the park that time before, when he had claimed to see the world drenched in blood.

“What the hell do you want?” Uryuu was clearly in no mood for company, as he wheeled on the interloper, anger glittering in his intense blue eyes. “Clear off and leave us alone — this has nothing to do with you.”

“Nothing to do with…” Orihime saw the look of disbelief followed by anger flit across Ichigo’s face, and inwardly she winced. “I came looking for a Hollow, and instead I find… shit, Ishida, what the hell were you doing?”

“She doesn’t have to answer to you or to anyone!” Uryuu stepped in front of Orihime, clearly intending to protect her, though the redhead bit her lip, trying to make sense of what was going on.

“I never asked Inoue anything. I’m talking to *you*.” Ichigo came striding towards them, tension rippling through his body. “Does she look like she wanted to be a part of that, whatever that was? The girl looks scared out of her mind. I thought you were better than that — or has losing your powers gone to your head and warped you totally, huh? Taking advantage of a girl in a public place… that ain’t the Ishida Uryuu I thought I knew.”

“I don’t know what you’re babbling on about.” Uryuu said darkly. “But I’ve had enough of wasting my breath with you. Whoever you think you are, you have no place here, and that can only mean you’re the enemy. Your uniform doesn’t belong to any squad I know, so that makes you a rogue. And a rogue is always fair game.”

“What the…” Ichigo faltered for a moment, and Orihime ran between them, holding up her hands.

“Please, don’t! Don’t! Both of you… don’t!” She begged, but Uryuu reached out to push her gently aside.

“If you don’t want to watch, Niji, you don’t have to.” He said softly, his aura glittering with whitish blue energy as he spoke. “But you know as well as I do that Shinigami are my business. This one is for me to deal with… it’s my job, after all, and you’d do better keeping out of it.”

He brought his hands together, and, as light glittered at the edges of his fingers, Ichigo let out an exclamation.

“Inoue, get away from him! Get away from him, *now*!”

Orihime hesitated, and Ichigo ran forward, forcibly pulling her behind him.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but whatever it is, this is a fight first and ask later kind of situation.” He said darkly, his fingers closing around the hilt of his sword. “Stay there, Inoue, and keep out of it. As he says, this is between him and me. Whatever he is.”

At this, Uryuu’s eyes narrowed, and Orihime could see his fingers flex as they became eclipsed by the surge of red light.

“*Shakka-hou*!” He exclaimed, and Ichigo cursed, dodging to one side as a ball of red electricity shot in his direction.

“What the…” He whispered. “Shit, that’s a Shinigami… that’s the thing that Rukia and Renji can do. That’s not a Quincy technique, it’s…”

“Kidou.” Uryuu said calmly, lowering his fingers. “Just because I don’t have my *zanpakutou* with me doesn’t mean that you can take me down easily, boy. I was always very good at Kidou.”

He twitched his fingers again, and Orihime’s heart clenched in her throat as she saw the crackle of white energy centre itself around his right hand.

“No! Ishida-kun, stop it — you’re going to break something — or someone!” She exclaimed, but Uryuu took no notice, fixing a hard gaze once more on the bewildered Ichigo.

“*Byakurai*.” He murmured, and a bolt of white lightning shot from his finger, clattering against Ichigo’s drawn *zanpakutou* and sending him flying backwards across the ground.

“Kurosaki-kun!” Orihime shrieked, and at the sound of her voice, Uryuu’s eyes widened in dismay.

“Niji?”

“Stop this! Stop it now!” Orihime put her fingers to her hairslides once more. “I mean it, Ishida-kun, stop it! I know you don’t want to fight with Kurosaki-kun, so stop it and let’s just talk!”

“Talk…?” Uryuu’s expression became unreadable, then, “I see. This boy is someone you like, after all. Have you lied to me, Niji? Have you simply used me to get what you wanted for your kin, after all?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Orihime protested desperately, tears glittering in her eyes. “I just don’t want you to fight! I don’t want anyone to get hurt… Ishida-kun, please!”

Uryuu’s expression became cold, and he reached out to grasp her by the wrist.

“Tell me the truth.” He demanded. “Do you love that boy? Is that what this is? Do you love him, after all?!”

“Ishida, get your hands off her!” Ichigo picked himself up, raising his sword as if to attack. “You should know by now that you can’t beat me… if I get knocked down, I get back up again. And I’m not going to forgive you treating Inoue like that. You should be ashamed — let her the hell go, before I cut you a new airway with Zangetsu’s tip.”

“Kurosaki-kun, no! Don’t!” Orihime protested. “Just stop it! Both of you… please… *stop it*!”

She closed her eyes, the glitter of her *Rikka* shield shooting out around her as a barrier sprang up between her and the angry Uryuu.

“Stop it.” She repeated, pushing him back until his grip was forced free. “I don’t want you to fight with each other because of me!”

For a moment, there was silence, as Orihime’s plaintive words rang out across the deserted street. Then, as if suddenly awoken from a deep sleep, Uryuu reached up to his head, casting Orihime a confused glance.

“I… noue-san?” He murmured, and Orihime’s eyes lit up with hope.

“Ishida-kun? Ishida-kun, did you just call me… Inoue?”

“What else would I call you?” Uryuu stared at her as though she was mad. “It’s your name, after all.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” Orihime let out her breath in a rush, flinging her arms around him. “You’re back to being Ishida-kun again, and you’re not going to try and kill Kurosaki-kun after all.”

“Kill…” Uryuu hurriedly disentangled himself from her embrace, taking a step or two away from her. “Inoue-san, what are you trying to…”

“I think that’s a question *you* need to answer, Ishida.” Kurosaki lowered his blade, coming across the asphalt to join them. “Since *you* were the one who fired off Kidou blasts at me first.”

“*What*?” Uryuu stared at him, then snorted, shaking his head. “Don’t be stupid. I’m a Quincy. I don’t use Kidou. And besides, right now I don’t…”

He faltered, biting his lip, and Ichigo sighed, sliding Zangetsu back into its normal travel position.

“You don’t have any *reiryoku* to speak of.” He finished quietly. “Right?”

Uryuu just stared at him mutely, and Orihime sighed, dropping to the floor now the tension was off.

“Inoue, are you all right?” Ichigo asked, and Orihime nodded.

“I’m fine.” She assured him, even though she knew she was still shaking. “I’m glad that it wore off before you hurt each other.”

“What wore off?” Uryuu cast her a wary glance. “What do you mean… what happened?”

He gazed around him, taking in the debris that littered the street, and his face paled.

“What happened?” He repeated. “Inoue-san, please, tell me.”

“Don’t you remember?” Ichigo frowned. “You seemed cocksure about firing those spells at me, and you managed it, too. Are you telling me you can’t even remember that?”

“I couldn’t use Kidou even if I wanted to, Kurosaki. You must’ve been mistaken.”

“And what about you kissing Inoue? Was I mistaken about that, too?”

“*K… k… kissing Inoue-san*?” Uryuu’s face went even whiter, and he stared at Orihime, aghast. “What the hell are you talking about, Kurosaki! Like I’d do something so…”

He faltered, and slowly Orihime reached up to touch her lips. She nodded.

“You did.” She murmured, apprehension in her gaze. “But it wasn’t

your fault, Ishida-kun. I don't think you were… you. And I don't think you… I don't think you knew I was me."

"Huh?" Ichigo looked foxed, and Uryuu swallowed hard, sinking down onto the curb and resting his head in his hands.

"I don't remember." He muttered. "I don't remember anything. I don't remember… Inoue-san, I'm sorry, I don't…"

"Like I said, it's not your fault." Orihime shook her head hurriedly. "You thought I was Niji, after all."

"Niji?" Ichigo dropped down beside them. "All right. Someone want to tell me what I'm missing here? Because you two are talkin' in code and I'd like to know what's going on, if you don't mind."

"If you find out, let me know." Uryuu raised his gaze to his classmate's. "I haven't the faintest idea myself, either. The last thing I remember is hearing a Hollow's scream, and wanting to make sure Inoue-san didn't get hurt by it. Then nothing till just then, when Inoue-san had her shield holding me back and was screaming at me."

He glanced down at his tattered uniform, reaching across to scoop up his mangled glasses before perching them unevenly on his nose.

"I look like something roughed me over, and feel like it, too." He added. "But I don't know what, or how."

"Inoue?" Ichigo glanced at the redhead, who frowned.

"Ishida-kun, you said the name Niji once before, when I was with you in the park." She said softly. "I didn't know it was a name, then. But if you thought I was Niji, she must be a person. Mustn't she?"

Uryuu rubbed his temples.

"There was a girl called that in a dream I had recently." He admitted awkwardly. "But it was just a dream. Just… a dream."

Orihime bit her lip.

"Maybe you should tell Kurosaki-kun about what happened in the park, after all." She suggested, and Uryuu flinched, shaking his head.

"That was nothing. And it's none of his business."

"Seems like it became my business when you shot *byakurai* at me and sent me flying across the street." Ichigo said acidly. "C'mon, spit it out. What's up? Has it got something to do with why you've been acting even more up your own ass than usual lately, or what?"

"I have not been!" Uryuu objected hotly, and Ichigo smiled wryly.

“You have.” He said frankly. “But it’s beside the point. Even if you’re under stress, I can’t see you kissing a girl in the middle of a street, even if she was wanting you to. An’ Inoue, of all people… so somethin’s going on. Inoue said that you weren’t you — an’ I’m more prepared to believe that than to think you an’ she have some secret tryst goin’ on.”

Uryuu reddened, and Orihime sighed, shaking his head.

“Ishida-kun and I are friends.” She said firmly. “And if he doesn’t want me to tell you, I won’t tell you about the park either. But I don’t think that Ishida-kun was Ishida-kun when he was fighting you. He said that he had a *zanpakutou*, though he didn’t have it with him. And he talked like…”

She cast Uryuu a troubled glance, then,

“Like he was a Shinigami.” She murmured.

“*I* did?” Uryuu looked scandalised. He groaned. “Great. This gets better and better.”

“You *did* say that.” Ichigo scratched his head. “Look, if you’re not going to spill to me, I’m goin’ to take you to Urahara-san an’ have him put the questions. I know he’ll get the answers even if I can’t — and right now you look too battered about t’be able to put up much of a fight if I decide to take you by force. So it’ll be easier if you talk, all right? Tell me. What happened in the park? What kind of dreams? And who the hell is Niji?”

Uryuu sighed heavily, but from the sag of his shoulders Orihime could tell that he was beaten, and slowly he nodded his head.

“In my dream, Niji was a Quincy.” He said quietly. “But I don’t know if that means anything.”

“And in the park…?”

“I saw everything covered in blood. Everything.” Uryuu shivered involuntarily, and Orihime swallowed hard, registering the greyness of his expression. “Like something had been there and killed… a lot of people. A whole lot. But it was just an illusion — and when Inoue-san came, she broke it.”

“Just like she did today, screaming at you and firing her shield.” Ichigo reflected. “Okay. And? Since when did you learn Kidou?”

“I told you. I can’t do Kidou.”

“Well, you could’ve fooled me.” Ichigo drummed his fingers on the

ground. “But you *did* lose your powers in Soul Society, right?”

There was a long silence, then Uryuu nodded his head again.

“I thought so. Even I can tell your reiatsu ain’t the same.” Ichigo said frankly. “You’re a damn idiot, though, because if you don’t tell us the truth, we can’t back you up.”

“I don’t want to be protected.”

“Right, but you’re happy enough going crazy in the meantime?” Ichigo challenged him. “Or do you not mind being some random nutter who blacks out an’ kisses a girl then attacks an ally for no apparent reason?”

It was impossible for Uryuu to look any more uncomfortable, and Orihime reached across to rest a hand on his shoulder.

“It wasn’t his fault.” She said softly. “Kurosaki-kun, I think..there was someone else inside of Ishida-kun. Ishida-kun can’t cast Shinigami spells, and he doesn’t know anyone called Niji. But we both saw him do those things — and if he doesn’t remember, maybe…”

Ichigo’s expression became troubled, and he sighed.

“I guess it would make sense.” He said uneasily. “Though now I do think we should talk to Urahara-san. I’m not kidding, Ishida. If Inoue’s right, it might be a big deal.”

Author’s Note:

By the way, for anyone who doesn’t know already, the chapter title refers to Ishida and Orihime. Ishida’s first name has the kanji for ‘dragon’ (ryuu) and Orihime’s the kanji for Princess (hime). Kitsch but cute, I feel…;)

Chapter Eight: Past Ghosts

Chapter Eight: Past Ghosts

The streets of Seireitei were quiet that afternoon.

As he walked between the rows of Shinigami offices and squad headquarters, Kira Izuru, Vice Captain of 3-Bantai felt a pang of regret stir deep within his heart. Ahead of him, he could see men hard at work repairing broken buildings that had been destroyed in one or other desperate conflict for supremacy and life, and as he passed, several of them stopped to acknowledge him with a brisk salute. They were men of various different squads, all of whom were no higher than the most basic Shinigami rank, yet somehow he envied them their inferior position and unremarkable lives.

They did not have difficult decisions to make, he thought, a flicker of resentment flaring up deep within his heart. They did not understand the pain of conflicting loyalties, and they probably never would.

“Good afternoon, Kira-fukutaichou.”

“Good afternoon.” Kira forced himself to return the greetings, offering them a faint smile. “Keep up the good work.”

“Yes sir!” Came the chorused response, and Kira sighed, raising his head to take in the imposing shape of the white tower that, only a short time before had held a young woman’s life in its hands.

He had not been on Soukyoku Hill when the execution had been stayed and the battles had raged. He had not been there when his own captain, along with Aizen Sousuke and Tousen Kaname had been sucked into the heavens, allying themselves with the Hollows that all of Soul Society had been taught to despise. He had hidden, ashamed and confused… and most of all, afraid.

He slipped into shunpo, re-materialising outside of the deserted court of the Central 46 as other memories flooded his senses. Inside, he knew, agents on behalf of the Sou-Taichou were taking the place to pieces, trying to make sense of the horror that had been discovered within, but Kira knew he didn’t need to investigate in order to visualise the scene of carnage that had taken place. He knew — he knew only too well.

“Follow me, Izuru.”

Ichimaru's voice echoed through his thoughts, and he glanced around, although he knew that the 3-Bantai Captain was nowhere nearby. In fact, he had never been so far away, and at the thought, Kira felt physically sick. He had worked hard, he knew, to be the best and most loyal Vice Captain that he could possibly be. Yet at the end of it all he had wound up being was a traitor by association — a coward too weak to raise his sword against a man that, by the end, he realised was capable of great evil.

Central 46 was sealed off to all those who did not have specific clearance, just as the offices of the three disgraced Captains had been. As yet, noone had reproached him for his own role in affairs, since the only ones who had been able to directly associate him with Ichimaru's schemes were Hitsugaya Toushirou and Hinamori Momo. Kira did not know why Hitsugaya-taichou had chosen not to report his presence within Central 46, but for some reason he had not yet done so — perhaps preoccupied with other, more important matters. And as for Hinamori… a stab of pain struck through Kira's chest at this thought, and he let out a little gasp, clasping at the folds of his *hakama* as he fought to get the sudden swell of emotion under control.

Hinamori had been almost killed by the sword of the Captain to whom she had devoted her entire life.

Kira's grip on his *hakama* tightened as he realised the significance of this. Like noone else, he knew that he himself had been fortunate to escape with his life. And though he knew so many things — though he longed to speak out and confess to them in front of the Sou Taichou — even now he was afraid.

He moved closer to the outer wall of Central 46's chambers, placing his palm against the woodwork as he remembered the scene within.
"Come on in, Izuru."

Ichimaru's voice once more echoed in his ear, and almost without thinking he took a step or two towards the door, pushing it gently and finding that it swung open beneath his touch.

"There's plenty of room for you to make yourself at home."

"Ichimaru-taichou, why are we here?" Kira remembered clearly his own confusion as he had stepped over the threshold of Seireitei's most official place. "Why are we…"

"Because it's the best way to play a game of Cat and Mouse." Had been the Captain's flippant, off-hand response. "After all, we're about to have more visitors."

“Visitors?” Kira had stared at his Captain blankly. “But Taichou, this is… this is Central…”

He had faltered, swallowing hard as he had registered for the first time the scene of bloodshed into which his Captain had so casually admitted him.

“Ichimaru-taichou.” He had whispered. “What happened to Central 46?”

“Seems they decided t’take the day off.” Ichimaru had told him carelessly. “So we’ve been helping them out.”

“We…?” Kira had struggled to form the words, his throat clenching as he realised that every man and woman in the room besides themselves was dead. “But they’re… they’re dead, Taichou. They…”

A cold chill had struck through him, as he had gazed at Ichimaru in horror.

“Taichou, did… you do this?”

“Izuru.” Ichimaru had been reproachful. “That’s not nice, doubting your own Captain like that.”

“I… I’m sorry.” Despite himself, Kira had felt shamed, even though deep down in his heart he knew that his superior’s off-hand answer indicated that Ichimaru had probably been involved in the slaughter of Central 46. “I didn’t mean to…”

“Ah, don’t look so down.” Ichimaru had chided him. “I didn’t bring you here for that purpose, after all.”

“Then… why?” Kira had whispered, and from the shadows at the back of the chamber, another figure had slowly begun to make himself visible.

“In order to help me out, Kira-kun.” The tones had been unmistakeably those of Aizen Sousuke, and Kira had stared at him in disbelief, almost thinking that he was seeing a ghost.

“You see, things are about to get a little complicated.” This apparition had continued, apparently oblivious to the fear he had stirred in the Vice Captain’s heart. “And it seems we need… an additional helping hand to clean up the last of the… shall we call it… mess?”

Kira had gaped, unable to believe his eyes, as the presumed dead Captain of the Fifth Division had stepped calmly down in front of him, offering him his usual, genial smile. Yet it *wasn’t* his usual smile, Kira

had realised as his heart lurched in his chest with fear. It was a surreal smile — something that did not belong in the place he was seeing it.

Aizen Sousuke was dead, yet he had stood right there, before him, speaking to him.

If he had not been in the presence of Captain class Shinigami, Kira would have rubbed his eyes to ensure he had not been seeing things.

“I… I don’t understand. Aizen-taichou, how are you… why are you… what… did you… Central 46…”

“You were called here today to speak to Central 46.” Aizen’s words were soft, and although Kira had known they were not true, all at once he had felt as though the corpses that surrounded him had suddenly begun to twitch and flare back into life, sitting up in their seats as though they had never been dead at all. He had taken a step back against the wall, bewildered as the sensation assailed all of his senses. At his confusion, Aizen’s lips had twitched once more into an amused grin, though his brown eyes had remained hard and cold.

“You see?” He had murmured. “Things aren’t always what they seem. Do you understand, Kira-kun?”

Wordlessly Kira had shaken his head, staring at the Captain numbly, and Aizen chuckled.

“Bringing people back from the dead is beyond your comprehension, I see.” He mused softly. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter. So long as you do as you’re instructed, it won’t matter at all. That side of it I’m sure you understand — don’t you, Kira-kun?”

“I… yes, sir. I… I understand.” Kira had stammered, and Aizen had nodded his head slowly.

“You do realise that now you’ve been here, there is no going back.” He said softly, and Kira flinched at the dangerous intent in the man’s normally gentle tones. “The only people who can protect you now are the ones you see before you — think about that very carefully. After all, you have broken rules and entered Central 46. And you are as tainted by the blood in this place as anyone else. You have no means to escape this, Kira. You have come to far now. And if you fail to finish what you began by letting Gin release you from your cell…”

His eyes had narrowed to near slits, chilling Kira almost to the bone.

“I will be forced to remove you from the equation.”

“Remove…?” Kira had swallowed hard, but Ichimaru had held up

his hands.

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary, Aizen-taichou.” He had said lightly. “Izuru’s a good boy. He does as he’s told. Don’t you, Izuru-kun?”

Kira had cast Ichimaru a startled look, strangely finding a shred of comfort in the man’s insincere smile. Inside of his mind every sense had begun screaming a protest at the things he was seeing and feeling, to the point where he had felt his whole brain was being slowly torn and twisted into tiny shreds. A glance at Ichimaru’s smiling, casual features and Kira knew with a jolt that it was this man who was scattering those shreds on the wind, and that, although for the first, terrible moment he had seen the glitter of the puppetmaster’s strings tightening themselves around his throat, he also knew that Aizen’s words were true.

He had done terrible things, and he had no way back. All he could do was obey Ichimaru’s orders. It was the safe option — the coward’s option. But in that moment, it was the only option that Kira’s numbed senses had understood.

Slowly he had nodded his head.

“Yes, sir.” He had mumbled.

“Hitsugaya Toushirou is heading this way.”

Aizen’s head had turned as he had picked up the flicker of familiar, surging reiatsu, and he had nodded, casting Ichimaru a glance.

“I’ll leave the rest to you, Gin. As we agreed.”

“My pleasure, Aizen-taichou.” Ichimaru had responded easily, inclining his head playfully towards the other Captain. Aizen’s eyes had glittered for a moment with amusement and then he had nodded, disappearing back into the shadows from whence he had come.

Kira had swallowed hard, feeling dizzy and sick inside as he struggled to understand what was going on.

“I guess it’s almost time for your part, Izuru.” Ichimaru had sauntered towards him, resting a loose hand on Kira’s shoulder, and although the touch was gentle, Kira had felt it burn through to his very core. He gazed at his Captain dazedly, and at his expression, Ichimaru had grinned.

“What’s that face for?” He had chided playfully. “It’s very easy, after all. It’s us gotta do the hard part. You just gotta play a little game of chase for me — that’s all. You can manage that, can’t you? After all,

Izuru, you're very good at running."

His smile had widened, and he reached down to touch Wabisuke's hilt.

"Hitsugaya will be here soon." He had said frankly. "But it doesn't suit our purpose if he should be the first one to discover the fact that we've been here. So that's where you come in. You'll be here, waiting for him. He's not alone, after all. His Vice Captain is with him."

He had laughed at this moment, a sound that stabbed right through Kira's senses.

"Hitsugaya's in for a surprise." He had said airily. "Seein' people comin' back from the dead ain't easy on the nerves — ah, but you know that, don't you? You've felt it, haven't you, Izuru?"

Kira had been unable to respond, and for a brief moment, Ichimaru's expression had become serious.

"Rangiku is with him." He had said quietly. "You understand? Hitsugaya's bein' invited to our little show here — but Rangiku isn't anything to do with it."

Kira had faltered, then,

"You want me to take Hitsugaya-taichou and Rangiku-san away from Central 46?" He had asked softly, a faint flicker of relief in his heart, and Ichimaru had laughed again, shaking his head as the serious moment was gone.

"Take them, for sure, but make sure Hitsugaya comes back." He had said frankly. "Jus' keep him away long enough… that we have time for a little, shall we say, squad reuinion? Rangiku ain't the only little maiden in his slipstream — or hadn't you noticed that Hinamori-chan's reiatsu was gone from 10-Bantai's cell?"

Kira's eyes had widened, and he stared at Ichimaru in horror.

"You… you aren't going to *hurt* Hinamori-kun, are you?" He had demanded, and Ichimaru had raised an eyebrow.

"What's this, Izuru?" He had asked teasingly. "You sound like you have a fondness for young Hinamori-chan."

"I don't want her to get hurt. She's not involved in this — she's a friend of mine and I don't want her to get hurt!" Sudden panic had overflowed in Kira's confused heart, and he had only just stopped himself from grasping hold of his Captain's *haori* in his desperation to make himself understood. "Please, Taichou — let Hinamori-kun alone!

I'll do what you say — exactly what you say, right down to the letter! I'll take them away from here — I'll keep Rangiku-san busy for as long as you want, even if it incriminates me further… but don't hurt Hinamori-kun. She… she's already been hurt enough."

Kira had not known why it had been suddenly so important to him to protect his former classmate's life, but in that brief instant he had felt that, if he could not extricate himself from this muddled mess, he could at least attempt to extract her from whatever it was his Captain and Aizen were plotting.

For a moment, Ichimaru had regarded him pensively. Then his smile had once more widened.

"If that's how you want it." He had said smoothly. "Follow your orders, Izuru, like a good Vice Captain. Don't worry about Hinamori. I'll take *very* special care to see that she isn't hurt."

"But he lied."

As Kira stepped into the main chamber of Central 46, he felt a wash of loneliness and betrayal flood over him. "He lied to me. He always lied to me. And he almost let Hinamori die."

"Kira Izuru! What are you doing here?"

The sharp tones of Soi Fon, Captain of 2-Bantai made the Vice Captain jump, swinging around and almost falling over backwards as he realised that, in the split second since he had walked through the door, he had become surrounded by masked, black-clad figures.

"I… I… I…" He stammered, and Soi Fon raised her hand in the air to stop her men from attacking, advancing on him herself. Soi Fon was not tall, and beside Kira she was diminuitive indeed. Yet Kira was not fooled by the woman's small stature. He knew as well as anyone that Soi Fon was the kind of Captain who would kill first and ask questions later if she thought that the values she held dear were being threatened in any way.

"You shouldn't be in a place like this." She said now. "Central 46 is out of bounds. To people like you, it's always out of bounds. You shouldn't have come here."

Kira faltered for a moment, glancing around at the blood-stained walls as he struggled to make up his mind. Then, at length, he sighed.

"I was here before, Soi Fon-taichou." He murmured. "I was here… with Ichimaru-taichou and Aizen-taichou. I was here… before Hinamori-kun and Hitsugaya-taichou were attacked."

Soi Fon's expression became one of shock, then suspicion.

"Should I be arresting you on that remark?" She demanded, leaning closer to him as she fixed him with a piercing gaze. "Is that a confession of guilt, Kira? Or conspiracy?"

"I don't know what it is." Kira admitted honestly. "I don't even really understand myself."

He turned to glance at the blood-spattered walls.

"When I was here, Aizen-taichou made all of that disappear." He murmured. "And I doubted my own eyes — that Central 46 wasn't dead, after all. That it had been an illusion. I didn't really understand… that's all. I suppose I came back here to understand… but I don't think that I do."

He glanced at the floor.

"Because they really all were killed, weren't they?" He added sadly, his shoulders sagging in defeat. "That wasn't an illusion. It was real. And Hinamori-kun and Hitsugaya-taichou were really attacked, too. I was the one who was foolish… following a Captain who only wanted to betray everyone."

Soi Fon cast him a disparaging look.

"You really are a coward, aren't you." She said scathingly. "I don't think you would have the courage to betray Soul Society, Kira. That kind of thing takes guts and a backbone — neither of which are things you have."

Kira hung his head, knowing that her assessment was brutal but probably accurate.

"I came here because Ichimaru-taichou told me to." He murmured. "I didn't know what I would find here, and I don't know what happened, exactly. I was told to make sure that Hitsugaya-taichou was taken far away from Central 46 just long enough so he couldn't interfere in… something. And Rangiku-san… her too."

"I see." Soi Fon's lips thinned. "And when Hitsugaya was attacked…?

Kira flinched at the ice in her tones.

"I told him to go back." He whispered. "Sooner than Ichimaru-taichou wanted me to, I told him to go. Because I was worried… about Hinamori-kun. I told him… to protect her. That he should… keep her safe, rather than… following me."

Soi Fon eyed him for a moment, then she let out a heavy sigh.

“This will be discussed more.” She warned him. “For now, this is definitely not a place you should be, confused or otherwise. You may be a hopeless wimp, Kira Izuru, but if what you said is true… I’ll need to speak to Hitsugaya and discover his side of it. *If* you tried to protect Hinamori, then Yamamoto-Sou-Taichou might be lenient with you. But don’t hold your breath. Being in this place at all is in breach of Seireitei rules for any Vice Captain without special clearance. Do you understand the implications of that fact?”

Kira’s fingers strayed absently to the Vice Captain’s insignia which he still wore strapped to his left arm, and he nodded his head.

“A Vice Captain shouldn’t be a puppet, in any case.” He said sadly. “I understand, Soi Fon-taichou.”

“Then go.” Soi Fon instructed him. “For now, I have no use for you.”

With that she gave him a rough shove back towards the door, and, knowing better than to disobey the head of the Special Operation Forces, Kira turned on his heel, trudging obediently back out the way he had come.

Once out in the fresh air, he raised his head to the sky, knowing that somehow Ichimaru and his companions had breached space to travel to Hueco Mundo.

I don’t deserve to be a Vice Captain, with the things I’ve done. I couldn’t stop you, Taichou. I couldn’t do anything at all. Just like always… I just followed without asking questions. If I’d asked more, would things have been different?

He brushed his hand against the hilt of his sword, a bitter smile touching his lips as he remembered how apt its choice of name was.

Well, only time would tell now. He had told Soi Fon the truth, and he couldn’t do more than that. If judgement fell on him, so be it. After all, with Hinamori-kun’s condition still critical…

At this thought, Kira’s heart once more clenched in his chest.

If it had been Abarai-kun, he’d never have made such stupid mistakes.

Resentment and hopelessness washed over him again as he remembered that Renji had taken on his own Captain, as well as Aizen and his companions in order to protect Kuchiki Rukia from the threat of death.

If it had been Abarai-kun, he’d have found a way to have stopped you,

Taichou. I'm sure of it. If it had been Abarai-kun, surely… somehow…

Kira dropped his head, slipping back into shunpo as he headed back to the 3-Bantai barracks. As he entered his quarters, he removed Wabisuke from its sheath, dropping it down on the unit and gazing at it mournfully before slowly un-looping his Vice Captain's insignia and dropping it on the top. Then he flopped down on his bed, closing his eyes.

Whatever came now, he would face it as best he could. The time for cowardice was over. No matter what the penalty, he would face it. And then, for once, he would try to move forward without regret.

"Tell me again what happened."

Urahara sat back in his seat, taking a sip of tea as he eyed the three teenagers with an interested expression on his hat-shadowed face. "This sounds most intriguing, Kurosaki-san. I'm looking forward to hearing more."

It was almost six thirty in the evening, and the Urahara-Shouten had long since closed its doors, yet at the arrival of the group of youngsters, the enigmatic storekeeper had been only too glad to push back the shutters and allow them access to his private quarters. Though he hadn't said as much directly, the scientist in him was always intrigued by Kurosaki Ichigo and his constant, voracious rise up the ladder of power, and despite how he had manipulated them in the past, he had a secret fondness for the gaggle of school children who had forged together in adversity and managed to take Soul Society to its knees.

They were, he reflected, very special children indeed. And, as he regarded them all now, he knew that he also owed them a good deal. Though they themselves probably did not realise the significance yet, they had begun to reverse a century of injustice by helping to unmask Aizen Sousuke as Soul Society's true enemy.

Even if I never go back there, maybe now people will know that I was telling the truth. Maybe they'll realise that what I did with the Hougyoku was out of desperation, not greed or cruelty… maybe eventually it will all be understood properly.

Urahara settled himself more comfortably in his seat, his gaze straying to the black cat who was curled up on a shelf above the window, seemingly engrossed in the ritual of cleaning her sleek dark fur, but at his glance, she paused, meeting his gaze with comprehending golden eyes before returning to her task.

For the sake of the people who stuck by me, I'd like that to be the case. For the sake of those hurt by it all, too. There's a lot to be put right yet… and maybe, at long last, I've found the people to help me do that.

"Well?" he pressed now. "You surely came here for my advice, so tell me as much as you can about this evening's little episode."

"There's not a lot more to tell." Ichigo grimaced, shaking his head. "It's pretty much just as I said. I found Ishida an' Inoue together an' Ishida was acting dead strange. He shot red fire an' white lightning at me, and spouted all kinds of crazy shit about Shinigami. Then he came to himself… and we came here."

Urahara's gaze flitted across the group to the other two youngsters, taking in Orihime's apprehensive expression and Uryuu's hunched form for a moment. Then he nodded.

"And you think that someone or something has got inside of you, Ishida-san, to make you do those things?"

"I don't know." Slowly Uryuu raised his gaze, his expression distinctly hangdog and uncomfortable as he met the shopkeeper's eyes. "I don't remember any of it."

"Nothing at all?" Urahara rubbed his stubbled chin, then he smiled. "Well, I suppose that would fit with the idea that something else was controlling your body. But even so, it's most unusual behaviour. Especially for a Quincy to start using Kidou and speaking like a Shinigami. I've not come across anything like it before — it's quite a novelty."

"Do you have to find it so funny?" Uryuu demanded, frustration glittering in his dark blue eyes. "It's not nice, you know, walking around not knowing when you might black out and forget a whole part of your day. And to make it worse, for it to be *Shinigami* things! I'm a Quincy, dammit! I *hate* Shinigami!"

"Hang on a minute." Ichigo held up his hands. "Ishida — this has happened before? You've had blackout moments before this?"

Uryuu bit his lip, reluctant to answer, and Urahara's smile widened.

"It seems that way, doesn't it." He murmured thoughtfully. "But nothing serious can have occured from them, else I'm sure that someone would have heard about it."

"Even so, you could've said that before." Ichigo cast his classmate an accusing look. "If it's happened before then it'll happen again, so you're twice the idiot I thought you were."

“Shut up, Kurosaki.” Uryuu snapped back. “It’s not any of your business and hasn’t been from the start.”

“In Phys. Ed the other day, when Keigo kicked the ball at you and you got knocked down.” Ichigo’s brain was clearly working now, putting pieces together. “Was that one of those times? Because you looked hella out of it. I thought you were concussed, but…”

“So what if it was?” Uryuu was on the defensive now. “Nothing happened — nothing bad, right? Besides, I wasn’t sure that was what happened. I’ve been tired a lot lately. That’s all.”

“It’s not the point! If you were blackin’ out, and you’re capable of firin’ Kidou, dammit, we needed to know!” Ichigo shot back. “If you don’t remember, how do you even know that you didn’t do anything bad?”

“Do you remember anything at school being set on fire?” Uryuu retorted. “Stop being so hysterical and reactionary. Nothing happened, all right? Even if I don’t remember clearly much of that afternoon, I know I went to class and if I’d done anything, you’d have seen it, unless you were skipping off class again to go hunting Hollows.”

“I was in school all afternoon Friday.” Ichigo returned neatly. “But even so, *shit*, Ishida! Just because you didn’t do anythin’ doesn’t mean you couldn’t’ve!”

“Well, I’m sorry for not knowing psychically that I could fire Kidou when I black out.” Uryuu’s voice shook slightly. “This is the first time that’s happened, so far as I know, and you knew about it straight away, so stop clucking like an angry hen because I didn’t tell you every little thing. I’m not so helpless that I need to run to you for assistance everytime something strange happens, you know. I was doing things my own way long before you even noticed I existed. There’s no reason to think I need your help now.”

“Right now you have no powers.” Ichigo said bluntly. “So pipe down and listen t’those of us who do for a while, all right?”

“Inoue-san, what do *you* think about all of this?” Before the argument could brew into something more violent, Urahara cut across the two boys, meeting Orihime’s gaze with a questioning one of his own. “You’ve been quiet so far — is there nothing you want to say about this afternoon’s encounter?”

At this, Uryuu and Ichigo both shot her anxious looks, and Urahara pursed his lips, absently wondering what had occured between them that had sparked such an instinctive, guilty reaction.

Orihime sighed.

“I fought a Hollow and destroyed it with Tsubaki.” She said softly. “Ishida-kun tried to protect me from it before that, and it knocked him down. I guess I feel guilty about that — is it my fault that whatever happened, happened? I mean, he was out cold when I went to him. But when I called Ayame and Shun’ou to heal him, he seemed to be waking up on his own. He said he thought the… the light or the power or something from Tsubaki’s attack stirred him — something like that. That was when he wasn’t Ishida-kun, though. He was… not like Ishida-kun at all, and he called me Niji. Then…”

She faltered, her cheeks pinkening, and Urahara pursed his lips, sneaking a sidelong glance at the two teenage boys as he assessed their behaviour. Uryuu had suddenly tensed, he realised, whilst Ichigo’s gaze was fixed on Orihime, as if inwardly willing her to be careful what they said.

I see. So something especially untoward occured between Inoue-san and her would-be protector, then. Something they don’t want me to know about. Interesting. Though they’re going to have to do better than that if they think they can conceal it from me so easily.

“Then?” He spoke aloud, his tones gentle and encouraging as he met Orihime’s grey eyes with his own blue ones. “What happened next? As much as you can remember, please, Inoue-san. *Every* detail might be important.”

Orihime pinkened further, awkwardly tucking a lock of red hair behind her ear. She did not meet the gaze of either one of her classmates, who exchanged troubled looks behind her back, and Urahara’s lips twitched into a ghost of a smile as he pieced together the parts of the story that they hadn’t told him.

“Then… then Kurosaki-kun came and he and Ishida-kun argued and Ishida-kun shot two blasts at him.” The girl continued carefully, her hesitation not lost for a moment on the enigmatic storekeeper. “I used my shield to push Ishida-kun back, since he was acting strange. And then he seemed to come around. That’s all.”

“That’s all.” Urahara echoed, knowing with even more certainty that it had been far from ‘all’. Both Uryuu and Ichigo had visibly relaxed as Orihime had finished her story, and Urahara stifled a smile.

Bless them, they think I’m so easy to fool. So naive, considering everything. Still, I won’t break their illusion. If they’ve brought this to me it means they mean to trust my advice. And amusing as it is watching them flurry around to hide their embarrassment, blackouts and Kidou use is not

something that should be taken lightly.

Aloud he said,

"And none of you have any idea what could have triggered this? Or, indeed, any other similar episode Ishida-san may have experienced of late?"

"I think it was the Hollow." Uryuu himself spoke up this time, twisting his fingers together agitatedly as he spoke. "I felt the Hollow's reiatsu and that's the last thing I really remember."

"The Hollow." Urahara mused. "I see. Very interesting."

"You don't think it has something to do with Aizen and his goons, do you?" Ichigo sounded anxious. "After all, Hueco Mundo is where he's gone — right?"

"I doubt it." Urahara got to his feet, setting his mug down as he did so. "You said yourself that Ishida-san spoke like a Shinigami. The Hollow may have been the trigger, but I doubt very much that it was anything more. Hollows and Shinigami are quite different beasts… Kurosaki-san, you should know that perfectly well by now."

For a brief moment, Ichigo tensed, a strange look entering his dark eyes. Then he sighed, nodding his head.

"I know." He said reluctantly. "It's just… it makes no damn sense, is all."

"Think how I feel about it." Uryuu muttered. "It's my head all this is going on in."

"Maybe it's because Ishida-kun lost his powers in Soul Society." Orihime suggested at length. "Because he can't be a Quincy any more, maybe…"

She faltered, shaking her head.

"But that would be strange, right?" She asked softly. "Quincy and Shinigami aren't the same either. So that doesn't make any sense."

Urahara folded his arms, leaning up against the wall of the chamber.

"Perhaps, perhaps not." He mused. "I don't think for one moment that losing Quincy powers could turn anyone into a Shinigami, unless, of course, they'd happened to be dealt a fatal blow. But… Ishida-san, how much do you know about the fate of your *reiryoku*? I'm of the impression you made the decision to gamble your power to win a fight — am I correct? You must have known, then, the outcome of that kind

of risk."

"Of course I did." Uryuu sounded on edge. "But in the circumstances, it seemed the right thing."

He glanced at his hand, then back at the shopkeeper.

"I removed the glove and fired off the last of my power." He added. "It burnt out, because I'm human and human beings can't manifest that level of power without being destroyed. Something like that… that's what my Grandfather told me, when he first gave the glove to me. That it was the ultimate in Quincy strength but that if I used it that way, my body would protect itself and my power would disappear completely."

"But you can still sense Hollows and shit, right?" Ichigo reflected, and Uryuu nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "Fat lot of good it does me right now, but yes."

"So that means that Ishida-kun's powers aren't totally gone, doesn't it?" Orihime's eyes widened. "Urahara-san, is that what you mean? If Ishida-kun can still sense reiatsu, then…"

"Oh, he's not without spiritual senses, that's for sure." Urahara said casually. "I'm sure I don't know the details, but it seems to me that the Quincy's ultimate power has a failsafe, that's all. It's as Ishida-san said. His body isn't able to control that level of power without destroying itself. So instead, it seals that power off and prevents it from being used. The result is the same as having lost it completely, of course. If there is a way to release that seal, as a former Shinigami it's not something I know anything about. But it means that Ishida-san can still sense reiatsu. That hasn't changed, even if he can no longer fight with it."

"Does that solve any of our questions, or just make more?" Ichigo demanded, and Urahara shrugged.

"Questions always make life interesting." He said absently. "And finding the answers is always rewarding. I don't know what's happening here, yet — not exactly. But I will speak to Tessai about the Kidou. It might be that he knows a way that a non-Shinigami is able to use Shinigami magic. After all, a lot of unusual things happen in Karakura-chou. It shouldn't be ruled out."

"Tessai-san?" Orihime looked startled, and Urahara nodded.

"He has some expertise in that area, as I'm sure Kurosaki-san remembers quite vividly." He said pleasantly, and Ichigo frowned,

casting his companion a dark look.

“I remember.” He murmured. “You think he’d really be able to make sense of this shit?”

“I don’t know about that. I simply said I’d ask him and see what he thought.” Urahara rubbed his stubbled chin absently. “I quite expect him to say that Kidou is a purely Shinigami discipline, to be honest with you. But all and any avenues must be investigated if we’re to find a solution to the problem.”

“You will help us, then?” Orihime asked eagerly, and Urahara laughed, nodding his head.

“If you have enough trust in me to ask me to, it would be my pleasure.” He said lightly.

“We do.” Orihime said fervently. “You know a lot more about Shinigami and stuff than any of us do, after all.”

“Kurosaki-san, Ishida-san, is that how you feel as well?” Urahara sent them both questioning looks, and slowly the two boys nodded their heads.

“It was me who decided we’d come here.” Ichigo added. “Whatever shit you pulled before, Urahara-san, Inoue’s right. You do know more’n we do. And if something’s operatin’ from inside Ishida, it might mean trouble. If he can fire Kidou at me, he can do it to anyone. An’ I don’t want t’see anyone get killed because of it.”

“Me either.” Uryuu muttered. “Believe me, me either.”

“Then, Ishida-san, I need you to tell me what these dreams of yours have been about.” Urahara turned his attention back to the Quincy. “In as much detail as you can remember, if you don’t mind. It may be irrelevant, but it might be important.”

“In… detail?” Uryuu looked uncomfortable, and Urahara raised an eyebrow.

“Something you don’t want to discuss…?”

“I don’t know if I remember everything.” Uryuu shook his head. “Like I said, I’ve been tired, lately. And when I have slept, it hasn’t done much to change that. I know I’ve had dreams, sometimes, but I haven’t remembered anything about them.”

“How d’you know, then?” Ichigo demanded, and Uryuu shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

“I don’t know! I just do, all right?” He exclaimed. “It’s just that kind

of feeling. I can't explain it."

He sighed.

"Inoue-san suggested after the trip to the park that I'd been sleep-walking, actually. And I began to wonder if maybe she was right after all. But I always wake up where I should be. It's just… I've never slept so deeply as that before, without feeling refreshed when I wake. It's strange. And like there's something at the back of my mind that I should remember about it… but I don't. Aside from once or twice, I don't remember anything clearly at all."

"And this Niji person? She was in one of your dreams?"

"Yes." Uryuu nodded slowly. "So far as I remember, Niji was a Quincy. If she was even a real person. Actually, now I think about it, it sounded like… like she might have been a relative of mine. At least, I think that her name… may have been Ishida."

"Shit." Ichigo's eyes widened. "What are we dealing with, then? Some ghost who's haunting her descendant with freak-ass memories?"

"No… Ishida-kun thought *I* was Niji." Orihime interjected softly. "And Kurosaki-kun, when you yelled at him, he… he thought you were talking to me. He acted like, when you called his name, you meant me. If Niji-san's name was Ishida, that would make sense. Wouldn't it?"

"As much sense as any of this makes." Ichigo groaned. "All right. I take your point."

"But if Inoue-san was supposed to be Niji-san, I wonder what that means *you* were supposed to be, Ishida-san?" Urahara asked softly, and Ishida shrugged.

"No idea." He admitted. "Although…"

"Although?"

"There was another guy with her. A… A Shinigami." Uryuu said unwillingly. "I don't remember his name, but he was… he was definitely *not* human."

"Ah." Urahara's expression became one of comprehension. "Now we're getting somewhere. Continue, please… we have plenty of time."

"That's pretty much all I remember about it." Uryuu shrugged helplessly. "About that dream, in any case. There was a guy and this Niji girl. And they were… talking. I don't really recall much more than that."

“*Just* talking?” Ichigo demanded, a meaningful look in his brown eyes and Uryuu reddened, glaring at him indignantly.

“Yes, *just* talking!”

“Calm down, Ishida-san.” Urahara held up his hands. “There’s no sense in getting upset about it. The best thing to do is to analyse each point one by one, after all.”

“If he thought I was Niji-san, maybe Ishida-kun thought he was… the other guy?” Orihime suggested slowly. “Oh, but wait… that doesn’t make sense either.”

“Why not, Inoue-san?” Urahara cast her a quizzical look, and Orihime chewed on her lip, agitation clear in her eyes.

“Ishida-kun didn’t want me to call him by that name.” She said softly, her cheeks pinkening once more as she spoke. “He wanted me to call him by his given name. He wrote it in the dust. *Uryuu*. I remember that. It’s what he said.”

“Ishida?” Ichigo’s eyes widened, and Uryuu held up his hands hastily.

“I don’t remember doing that!” He exclaimed. “Even if it was me, even if it was my name, I don’t remember! Why would I expect Inoue-san to call me Uryuu? It doesn’t make any sense!”

He frowned.

“Besides, I don’t know if inside of me knows who it is, entirely.” He said, somewhat confusingly. “It wouldn’t be the first time things got garbled together, after all. The other night, when I did my maths assignment — I began with one set of handwriting and finished with another. It wasn’t like someone else took over half way through. It was like I didn’t know whose style I should be writing in, so went gradually from one to the other.”

He buried his head in his hands.

“And then there’s the fact I don’t even remember answering those questions at all.” He added dolefully. “So whatever I do and say at the moment, unless I remember it clearly, I don’t think… that it’s me.”

“What kind of possessing spirit would do your maths homework for you?” Ichigo stared at him in disbelief, and Uryuu shrugged.

“You tell me.” He retorted. “I’m only saying what I know.”

“And this trip to the park you mentioned? What was that about?” Urahara asked curiously.

“When I was in the park with Inoue-san, I saw a lot of people covered in blood.” Uryuu continued slowly. “It was like the site of a massacre, but… all the people were clothed in white. Quincy white, Urahara-san, even though what they wore looked different to what I wear… wore. And I thought… in the background, I thought I saw something in black flit through the trees. But it’s sort of blurred in my mind, now. Inoue-san came and spoke to me and it brought me back to myself.”

“And after that happened, how did you feel?”

“Feel?” Uryuu bristled. “I’d just hallucinated a battlefield full of corpses, Urahara-san. What do you think I felt like? Nauseated. Shocked. Horrified. What do you expect me to say?”

“Tired, perhaps?”

“Dammit, I already told you that.”

“And that whatever you’d seen… you felt a connection with?”

“I… don’t know.” Uryuu faltered. “It was all too… sudden. And shocking. And… I didn’t know what to think. It sounds crazy, Urahara-san, but it almost seemed like what I was seeing was…”

He paused again, and Urahara raised an eyebrow.

“Was?” He echoed softly, and Uryuu swallowed hard.

“Was the massacre of the Quincy.” He murmured. “Two hundred years ago.”

Author’s note: And some confessions for unsuspecting readers.

Yep, chapter Eight and I’ve dragged in someone else to the mire. I think people should probably be aware by now that this story isn’t going to be as simple or as clearcut as it may have first appeared. I don’t think I’m cut out for simple storylines :S

Here’s the deal…

When I put it on the site, I listed the main characters as being Ishida and Ichigo. I probably lied, because although Ishida is the central character, I’m not sure that Ichigo’s role is as big as it might have been. Unfortunately, since there are two or three other characters who are going to play significant roles, it’s difficult for me to choose just one of them. So because Ichigo is the central character in Bleach, and therefore bound to be involved, I used him. Although at the moment I’m setting myself the challenge of a Bleach story in which Ichigo doesn’t bring out Zangetsu’s

Bankai to save the day (heh). This really isn't his spotlight, after all!!

This story is about Ishida. But it's also about Soul Society, the aftermath of Aizen's rebellion and the possibilities that my deluded brain has dreamt up regarding squads, history and situations. When I said it was a potential replacement for the BOUNT arc — I guess I was probably being accurate. It is becoming/has become an arc in it's own right, with a mind and a will of its own.

Basically, though it's centralised on Ishida and the Quincy massacre, it has other facets too. Other characters facing other issues… etc. And hopefully having them all tied up in a nice bundle at the end :D

Also, regarding the pairings — like everyone I have my favourite pairings. But, since this story is set after the SS arc and before all the arrancar stuff, I'm not intending to mess with the way things are too much. Bleach is a story where a lot of characters like other characters but few of those characters ever get to a point of reciprocally sharing their feelings. I think that's, in a sense, the way I'm writing, too. So to me, Ishida likes Orihime. But in the HM arc, Orihime likes Ichigo. To me, Renji also likes Rukia, and Kira likes Hinamori. But there's no relationship going on beyond the obvious close friendship in those cases either. The only pairing that will get any real airtime is Ishida and Orihime on account of the parallel between Ishida and Orihime and Ametatsu and Niji. So anyone with any concerns about how I'm going to twitch these characters or eventually pair them up — this is a Bleach fic. Bleach dislikes finalised pairings. So I'm not going to write them :P

Sometimes the ongoing chemistry is more fun in any case ;)

Oh yeah, and as requested, some Urahara ;)

Chapter Nine: Captain of the Gotei 13

Chapter Nine: Captain of the Gotei 13.

The wind blew gently across the surface of the river, sending small ripples out from the centre towards the banks on either side. At the furthermost edge, a group of small children clustered, rag-clothed and barefooted as they scrapped over a grubby device that, once upon a time may have been something resembling a fishing rod.

In the background, the darkening sky was shaded by the hazed smoke of waste fires and as he sat there, drinking it all in, Ametatsu wondered absently what it would have been like if he was a proper part of this world.

Though he had never thought of it before coming here, of late he had begun to reflect on the kind of person he might have been once, in the time before he had donned the Shinigami black hakama and entered the complicated world of the Gotei 13. Like his fellows in Seireitei, he had no lingering recollection of his Real World life — how it had begun, how it had ended, or why he had been able to manifest such strong spiritual power when so many of his Rukongai associates were content just drinking water and shuffling along in their day to day lives.

A faint smile touched his lips as he bent down to brush his fingers through the cool water. He did not even remember clearly why he had initially decided to go to Seireitei and take the exam which would change his life forever. His recollections of before that time, even, were yet hazy and unclear, as though the first thing he knew with any certainty was that he had graduated in the top three of his year and had at last had the opportunity to enter a squad.

He still bore that recollection with pride. He had been lucky, he knew, for he had been taught well and then trained well by one of Seireitei's most experienced Captains. And because of that fact, he was here now, in the Real World, doing something which, in the normal run of things, was reserved for senior Captains of some years duration.

He had been Captain of 10-Bantai for only ten years — a heartbeat in Shinigami terms. Yet they had had faith in him, and he had resolved as he had stepped through the Senkei Gate that he would not disappoint his seniors' faith in him.

But then, of course, that was before he had arrived in Karakura and before he had met the gentle grey gaze of Ishida Niji.

Even that, in itself, might have been less complicated, had he not immediately realised that their connection, despite being impossible, was deeper than any bond he had had with anyone before. Just the sight of her pretty features, the sound of her laugh, the image of her long red hair blowing loose in the breeze as she fired off an arrow into the ether to destroy a Hollow and protect her clan was enough to make him realise that this was no ordinary human woman. Although he knew she was Quincy, and therefore, to all intents and purposes, the opposition, Ametatsu had been unable to contain how he felt.

Niji was different, he knew that. And somehow, through their friendship, he was determined to find peace.

After all, before he had left, was that not the last thing Ukitake-taichou had said to him?

'If you can resolve it without bloodshed, Shizuki, then do so. "The older man had told him, his voice hoarse and his thin face pale and drawn from the sudden onset of one of his ritual spasms." I know that you will listen, if you can, and do your best to succeed — and whatever the outcome, we want to avoid bloodshed. They are humans, after all. Humans who are upsetting the balance, true, but humans none the less. And Shinigami exist to protect all humans — so we must find a way to protect them as well."

These words had stuck with Ametatsu as he had followed the black Hell Butterfly though the darkness to the Real World. And, now he had met Niji, he was even more convinced that Ukitake-taichou's way of looking at things was right.

But even if that was true, just believing that would not be enough. Any naivety Ametatsu might have had on that score had soon faded once he had entered the negotiation battle and seen for himself the intricacy of the situation he and his fellows were facing.

The children who played so near at hand were oblivious to the fact they were being watched, as the black-and-white clad Shinigami made his way slowly back towards the quarters he and his travelling companions had been assigned during their sojourn to the real world. It had been another long day, with each side giving ever more complicated reasons why they should be considered the ones acting with the most right. That morning, the head of the Mabisu Quincy clan had had his chance to take the floor, and Ametatsu's heart had sunk into his Shinigami sandals as he'd listened to the most belligerent and defiant of the human representatives give voice to his grudges in front of a trapped audience.

"Shinigami are nothing more than dead souls dictating to us the fate of our loved ones." He had concluded, words that had stabbed right through

to Ametatsu's very soul. "They have no right to dictate to us, the living, how we should act. They do not belong in this world, and they have long since failed to defend humankind adequately from the threat Hollows pose. If they consider their balance so important to the survival of everything, why have they only now come to put their point across? Why have they let generations of people be brutally slain by monsters while they stand by and do nothing?"

To answer him, Kuchiki Ginrei had taken the floor, and something about his quietly imposing presence had calmed the atmosphere somewhat, although Ametatsu knew that they were running out of time and were still far from a solution. Ginrei was an experienced fighter and a skilled negotiator, but Ametatsu knew only too well that he, like most Shinigami in Soul Society, viewed the Quincy as inferior beings subject to Seireitei's rule. The spiritual world was their province, and humans should not cross into it.

But it was not the only answer.

Ametatsu sighed, feeling stifled. Had he been wrong to come to the Real World in the first place? Perhaps he had. But then, if he had not, he would not have met Niji. And despite the confusion, somehow he knew this had been a call of fate. He had been meant to come here — he had been meant to meet her, and come to understand things from the Quincy's point of view. For the sake of peace between the two peoples, she and he were their strongest hope. He had faith in her, and he knew he had gained at least the Ishida clan's trust because of it.

"Shizuki?"

The gate of the property swung back, revealing the older Captain, and Ametatsu bowed his head slightly in deference to the noble-born officer, stepping inside the compound.

"Where have you been?" Ginrei's question was soft and even, yet it hid a question that Ametatsu was too sharp not to pick up on.

"Walking by the river. Taking air and thinking over today." He said simply. "It's been a hard one, Kuchiki-taichou. At this rate, I can't ever see an end to it."

"It's true that Mabisu Kouji is not willing to concede that the Hollows are the domain of Shinigami and have been for generations before he was even born." Ginrei agreed soberly. "He is a danger to any hope of settling this without bloodshed. But for the time being, we have no choice but to continue the discussions and see what can be settled. You know that too, I think."

"Yes." Ametatsu admitted. "It's a complicated issue. Have we heard any more from Soul Society since yesterday? I know that Shihouin-taichou was going to contact Seireitei to see whether things had stabilised there, after all."

"One district in Rukongai has all but fragmented." Ginrei's expression darkened. "Though for the time being the others have stabilised. Central 46 have given the order for all remaining Captains to provide spiritual support while they do their best to keep things steady — but it sets a worrying precedent. Shizuki, you've spent more time with the Quincy than we have since our arrival. You must know whether or not they have continued to hunt Hollows even despite our presence."

"I've only spent time with the Ishida, and they are on our side." Ametatsu said frankly. "None of them would think of breaking the rules of this negotiation. Our special forces are here in numbers to destroy all the Hollows in the area, and in return all Quincy in negotiations with us have lowered their bows. No, Kuchiki-taichou. I don't think that they are contravening the agreement. They know as well as we do how much rests on this."

"The future of their people." Ginrei rubbed his chin pensively. "Perhaps you are right. It is true that the Ishida elders seem predisposed to talk. But I am not so confident in the actions of the other Clans. Mabisu was decidedly defiant this morning. Had they ceased completely in the hunting of Hollows, I would have expected a more satisfactory report from Seireitei. But as it is, we will just have to try and speed up the negotiations as best we can. Central 46 has instructed us to do so, after all. We remain here one more week. A decision must be reached in that time, whatever it might be."

"One week?" Ametatsu faltered, staring up at the other Captain in dismay, and Ginrei nodded.

"You are subject to the same orders as we are." He warned. "As a Captain of the Gotei 13, Shizuki, I hope you understand what position of trust you've been put in even being sent here. I know you are capable and a talented fighter — but you know that it concerns me that you have let your impartiality be breached by that Ishida girl."

"Who in this is impartial?" Ametatsu snorted. "In all honesty, none of us are."

"You understand fully my meaning, however, so don't pretend that you do not." Ginrei clapped his hand down on Ametatsu's shoulder. "One week, Shizuki. If you believe so wholeheartedly in finding peace between their people and ours, you must work harder to extend the hand of trust to the

other clans. That you have gained the Ishida family's trust is commendable, but I do not approve of the manner in which you have gained it. Remember who you are and why you are here. You are on the verge of a very dangerous situation, if you do not realise that."

His lips thinned.

"The Shinigami cannot be seen to favour one clan over the others, if we seek to pacify all without resorting to extreme measures."

"I understand that." Ametatsu protested, and Ginrei eyed him carefully.

"See that you do." He said softly. "It is not often that a Rukongai citizen becomes one of the exhalted Gotei 13 Captains. You carry not only your own pride, but the pride of Rukongai on your shoulders in being here. Think about that for a while before you act recklessly. Your actions affect those around you — perhaps even that girl you so adore."

He released his grip.

"Besides, at the end of this week, regardless of the situation, we will all return." He added. "You will have to part from your young woman then — there is no place for living humans within Soul Society. And you have no place in this world."

"I know that." Ametatsu said sadly. "Believe me, I know that."

"Then reflect on it a while." Ginrei offered him a slight smile. "I'll see you at dawn tomorrow, Shizuki. I hope to hear you speak, after all, of your ideal in helping us find common ground."

Uryuu opened his eyes, taking a deep breath as the colours faded away to the dull blackness of the bedchamber. For a moment he lay there, disorientated by the flood of pictures that had inundated his senses then, as he became more alert, he realised that he had had another of his unpredictable, confusing dreams.

He sighed, pulling himself up into a sitting position and reaching out his hand to the nightstand to scoop up his glasses. His fingers brushed against a hard wooden wall, however, and he faltered, confused.

Where was he?

At length, the answer came to him, as he remembered the conversation he, Ichigo and Orihime had had with Urahara the evening before. After they had finished talking, Ichigo had taken Orihime home, but Urahara had instructed him to remain behind.

"After all, if there's something acting within you, Ishida-san, it

might be safer for you to be somewhere where we can deal with emergencies as they happen." The shopkeeper had said casually. "And this way, at least, Tessai can take a look at you for himself. I'm sure he'll be quite interested to investigate a human who managed to use Kidou."

Uryuu rubbed his temples, remembering how Urahara's giant of an assistant had poked and prodded at his thin frame, asking questions he had no idea how to answer until it had been late into the night. At that point, Urahara had rescued him, providing him with a simple chamber at the rear of the shop where Uryuu had been only too glad to lay down and sleep.

As his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, he made out the edges of his glasses glinting in the light, and he reached across to pick them up, fingering them gingerly as he remembered the damage they had suffered in the battle with the hollow. Someone had straightened the metal frames, however, and though the glass was still cracked from one side to the other, he found that they slid more easily onto his nose than they had done the previous day.

Getting to his feet, he scooped up the blanket that had covered him, wrapping it around his shoulders as a cool breeze blew through the cracks in the wall.

At least he had not had to go home and spend time with his father that evening. More, this time he had remembered his dream in vivid detail, and as he heard the soft murmur of voices from somewhere else in the property, he made up his mind that he might as well share those details with someone else before he forgot them completely.

"Shizuki." He murmured out loud. "And… Kuchiki. Kuchiki… Ginrei? I suppose that's a relative of Kuchiki-san's, though it doesn't really matter all that much. The guy's name is Shizuki. That's what I need to hang on to."

As he drew closer to the main body of the shop, he found that he could make out two distinct voices, and as he heard his name, he paused, edging closer to the door as he listened.

"You think, then, that my keeping him here tonight was the best idea?"

That was Urahara, his distinctive, playful tones clear and crisp on the night air, and Uryuu quelled his feeling of guilt that he was eavesdropping on a private conversation.

"If the kid did shoot Kidou, then it was the only thing you could

do.” That voice was female, and Uryuu realised that the shopkeeper’s old friend Shihouin Yoruichi had discarded her cat-like disguise, retaking her original form. He squinted through the crack in the door, making out her slender form sprawled gracefully across one of Urahara’s rugs as she ate fruit from a bowl on the table between them. “Ordinary people might get hurt, after all.”

“It’s not just that.” Urahara admitted. “To be honest, Yoruichi-san, I was intrigued by their story. That a person could be possessed by a ghost is not unheard of, after all. But by the spirit of a Shinigami? I didn’t think that sort of thing happened.”

“I’ve not come across it before, either.” Yoruichi responded. “So far as I know, Shinigami souls are dispersed into the atmosphere of Seireitei, where they linger until they are reborn as souls here in the Real World. That really doesn’t suggest there’s any room for Shinigami to manifest as ghosts. They’re already soul-based spirits, after all — aren’t they?”

“As you said.” Urahara nodded. “Even for me to remain here in this way required me to construct a significantly durable and flexible gigai in order to function in normal life.”

“This is normal life, is it?” Yoruichi sounded amused, and Urahara laughed.

“Well, so normal as life is, where I’m concerned.” He acknowledged good-naturedly. “But we digress. Certainly none of the research I ever did into Shinigami ever indicated that they could become ghosts.”

“But it doesn’t mean that it’s not possible.” Yoruichi mused. “A lot of things have happened in Karakura already which defy reason, after all. This is just another one in that line.”

“I suppose so.” Urahara sounded thoughtful. “But it is an interesting sequel to an already interesting problem. Kurosaki-san came to me a day or two before, you know, to ask me whether I knew a way to return Ishida-san’s powers to him.”

Uryuu froze at this, his body tensing as he digested this previously unknown piece of information.

“He did?” Yoruichi seemed surprised.

“He did.” Urahara confirmed. “And then this, a matter of days later. Not that I think the two things are connected — although when they first started to explain it, I did wonder if they had been meddling with things they should not have been in order to find their own way to bring back Ishida-san’s powers.”

“I wouldn’t put it past them.” Yoruichi sighed. “But you don’t think so now?”

“Kurosaki-san as yet remains completely ignorant of Kidou in all its various guises.” Urahara said frankly. “His only acquaintance with it is dodging it, whether it be fired by a professional like Kuchiki Byakuya or a renegade like Abarai-san. No, Yoruichi-san. I don’ t think this is of their doing.”

“Seems unlike Ichigo to be that perceptive about someone else’s reiatsu.” Yoruichi murmured, and Urahara chuckled, nodding his head.

“It’s almost as though Kurosaki-san *is* starting to get more perceptive about things like that… that he could pick up Ishida-san’s lack of *reiryoku* enough to come to me — and then, this time, too. Although the boy is still undergoing… changes. So I suppose I should expect him to improve in some areas, even if he deteriorates in others.”

“If you mean what I think you mean…”

“For now, there’s a more pressing issue at hand.” Urahara said softly, and Uryuu had to strain to pick up every word. “I had almost hoped that Tessai might bring the Shinigami out of Ishida-san, if that is indeed what it is. I was curious to see what kind of reiatsu that might give off.”

“So you’re going to treat the boy like an experiment?” Yoruichi sounded amused, and Urahara laughed, shaking his head even as Uryuu’s heart stilled in his chest.

“Not at all. I plan on trying to help them find a solution, that’s all.” He said lightly. “They’re very useful young allies to have, after all. Besides, all of this is only likely to complicate the chances of Ishida-san’s Quincy powers ever recovering themselves. Whatever the cause, I’m sure that it would cause problems if it was allowed to be left unchecked. You know, Yoruichi-san, that Quincy and Shinigami don’t traditionally get along.”

“All too well.” Yoruichi said frankly. “And you think that if you don’t fix this, then *he* might not be interested in putting Ishida’s spirit power back together?”

He?

Uryuu pressed closer to the wood, disbelief flooding his expression. Who was ‘*he*’? Did Urahara-san know someone, then, who knew how to restore Quincy powers? Did he know a way, after all, for him to

regain his former strength?

“I don’t know what’s behind today’s events, but I’m pretty sure that if he’s using Kidou, it’s something that should be looked into by Soul Society.” Urahara was speaking again. “They’re probably the only ones who might be able to cleanse whatever it is out of him. Here, in this atmosphere, I don’t have an option to do that. And the sooner it’s done, the better. Whatever the cause, for a living Quincy to have Shinigami powers is a worrying sign. I don’t know for sure, but I suspect it could mean the extinction of the boy’s Quincy potential forever. And that would be a shame, since come the Winter, we’ll probably need all the firepower we have.”

“Ishida was foolish, that’s all. He knows it as well as we do.” Yoruichi said simply, and Uryuu winced at her casual analysis. “He fought a battle he wasn’t ready to fight. Still, he spends enough time with Ichigo for that kind of recklessness to have rubbed off on him. I probably should have done more to stop him, but in the circumstances…”

“Mayuri is not an easy opponent to take down.” Urahara agreed. “Ishida-san must have fought very hard indeed, to defeat him. That in itself tells me that we should be doing all we can to protect his potential as a Quincy.”

“Even though the Quincy are the traditional enemies of the Shinigami?”

“Not necessarily in all cases.” Urahara said cryptically. “Ishida-san has aligned himself with Kurosaki-san and his friends quite openly. I don’t see any reason for that to change. In the Winter battle, he will fight for the right side. Besides, there’s another motivation, too. One which will probably have an even stronger call on him than even his desire to fight on equal terms with Kurosaki-san and his ever-changing power levels.”

“Which is?”

“Yoruichi-san, you haven’t noticed?” Urahara sounded amused. “Maybe you haven’t paid as much attention to them as you thought. They’re teenagers, after all. Unusually gifted ones, of course. But teenagers nonetheless. And even being possessed of great spiritual power doesn’t make you immune to other natural stages of teenage life.”

“Oh. You mean that.” Yoruichi was off-hand, and Uryuu’s cheeks burned as he realised what they were talking about. “I thought it a good thing and let it be. After all, the Quincy are a stubborn bunch

and always have been. If one of them is driven by more than just their pride… well, I thought it was probably a good thing. It hadn't escaped me, Kisuke. That boy's arrows flew against Kurotsuchi for more reasons than just his family's name, I'm sure of that. But he's an awkward kind of person, Ishida. It's better the less that's said — or the more preoccupied he'll become."

"From the evasive nature of their behaviour today, I think that those children were trying to conceal something of that nature from us." Urahara admitted, and Uryuu bit his lip, knowing he should leave now but somehow unwilling to tear himself away.

Yoruichi laughed.

"Teenagers are teenagers, like you said. Let them believe they did." She said comfortably. "In the meantime, I've been in touch with Soi Fon and disturbed her work enough to ask her about getting clearance for Ichigo to go to Soul Society. It's easier to send him, for now, and see whether he can find anything out."

"And Ishida-san?"

"He'll have to go too, eventually, but that will take a little longer to achieve. He's not able to go through quite the same route, after all."

"True." Urahara acknowledged. "All right. You're right. Kurosaki-san should go first. And I'll see about preparations to send Ishida-san along too."

He paused, and through the crack in the door, Uryuu was sure he saw the enigmatic storekeeper's smile widen beneath the brim of his striped hat.

"And Inoue-san too, I think." He said pensively. "For some reason, I think that might be the best idea… don't you?"

That was enough for Uryuu, who turned on his heel and hurried back towards the sanctuary of his tiny chamber. Sinking down onto the floor, he took in a deep breath of air, trying to calm his racing heart.

Urahara-san knows what happened in the city today. He knows what happened, even though we didn't tell him. And he knows… what does he know… about Inoue-san?
He closed his eyes, struggling to bring back the shreds of his normal composure.

More importantly, was he serious when he talked about my powers returning? Did he mean it — is there a way to do that? What did he mean,

*when he said '**he**'? Why is it that man answers one question and creates a thousand others every time we meet him, anyway? Can we really trust him?*

He opened his eyes, glancing at his hands through the cracked glass of his spectacles. Had he really fired Shinigami spells from those fingers? Those same fingers which had manifested and fired the bow of spirit particles for so many years had somehow cast unknown magic into the ether, and it gave him chills just thinking about it.

And as for the other thing…

*If Inoue-san hadn't confirmed it, I wouldn't believe that I could've done something so unlike me. But to kiss a woman in the middle of the street — even if I wasn't myself, what was I thinking? And of all people… for it to have been **her**. And if that wasn't bad enough, for it to have been seen by Kurosaki! Damn, I should have Urahara-san lock me in! If I can do something like that without realising it, I'm not safe to be around anyone, let alone my classmates!*

Flickers of his dream returned to him at that moment, and he leant back against the wood panelling.

"This Shizuki is the one to blame." He muttered. "Whoever he is. Shizuki whatever his name is, Captain of whichever squad that Kuchiki guy said he was part of. He's the one who's doing this to me. I don't know how, and I don't know why. But whoever he is and whatever he's doing in my head, I want him out!"

He clenched and unclenched his fists.

And if Kurotsuchi Mayuri really did have something to do with it… somehow he'd make damn sure that that wretched Shinigami regretted ever having crossed his path.

Somehow.

A Captain's Meeting.

Kira stood before the huge wooden doors, his heart in his throat as he struggled to contain the urge to turn tail and flee. It had been only a matter of days since he had admitted to having been present in Central 46's private chambers, whilst Aizen and Ichimaru had plotted around him. Although he had pondered and worried on the wisdom of that decision ever since he had returned to his own quarters, he had not expected to be called before a Captain's Meeting quite so soon.

He clasped his hands together, clenching them tightly so as not to

look like he was trembling, though even as the doors began to swing open, he felt sick and giddy with fright at the thought of what awaited him. He had never stepped before a Captain's Meeting before, or even dreamed of entering such a place when he had never aspired to wear the white *haori*. Yet now he had been called here, and in the absence of Central 46, he was half afraid that it was a meeting which would pronounce on him some final, terrible judgement.

"Enter, 3-Bantai Vice Captain Kira Izuru."

The Sou Taichou's gravelled voice echoed out through the hallway and slowly and shakily Kira shuffled forward, finding it an effort to put even one foot in front of the other as he obediently entered the vast hall. For a moment he faltered, taking in the white and black clad beings that flanked each side of the walkway, then, as he registered the fact there were gaps in the ranks, he swallowed hard, fighting to regain his composure.

3-Bantai. 5-Bantai. 9-Bantai. All squads without Captains. All abandoned in the pursuit of greed and evil.

At this thought, Kira stopped altogether, unable to force his terrified body to take even another step into the room. Had it been filled with Hollows, he told himself bitterly, he would have drawn his sword and defeated them, having confidence at least in his ability to do his duty by the dead. But today Wabisuke remained in his quarters and, as an after thought, he had also left his adjutant's badge behind as well.

If they were going to strip him of his rank, they would at least have to do it without ceremony.

"What are you spacing out for, Kira?" The brusque tones of Hitsugaya Toushirou, the youngest Captain of the Gotei 13 broke through his wild musing and he glanced across, meeting the cool aqua gaze with a troubled one of his own. "Noone's about to kill you — get a grip on yourself, and remember where you are."

Kira swallowed again, stumbling a few more steps forward before his legs gave out completely, and he sank to the ground in between the two rows of Captains, bowing his head low before the Sou Taichou. Even as he did so, he was aware of eyes on him from all sides, and not for the first time since this whole business had begun, he wished that the ground would open up and swallow him whole.

"Kira-fukutaichou, why are you not wearing your insignia of office this morning?" Yamamoto Sou Taichou's first question was a surprising one, and Kira jerked his head up, staring at the old man in

confusion.

“Sir?”

Yamamoto gestured to his arm, a questioning expression in the wise old eyes.

“You were called here before a Captain’s Meeting, were you not?” He asked softly. “As such, you are expected to denote your rank on accepting such a summons.”

“I… I… I…” Kira bit his lip, then, “I didn’t know if I… I was still allowed to… to wear it, Yamamoto Sou Taichou, sir.”

“Not allowed to…” Ukitake trailed off, casting Kira a startled glance. “Why would you not be, Kira?”

“Because of… of what I told Soi Fon-taichou… about what happened at Central 46.”

Kira wrung his hands together, knowing he looked pitiful but too frightened by now to care.

“That is why you are here, true enough.” Yamamoto lowered his wrinkled, bald head slightly in confirmation of the younger Shinigami’s words. “But I don’t believe anyone has spoken of stripping you of your rank. Or are you saying that you choose to resign it, in light of the circumstances?”

“I…” Kira looked blank, and Kurotsuchi let out an irritated sigh.

“Are we going to spend all of the meeting watching a worm squirm in front of us?” He demanded derisively. “What fool made him a Vice Captain in the first place, if he can’t even string his words together in one sentence? I’m sure I could fashion up a more reliable Vice Captain in my lab, if given the time and the right materials…”

“Kurotsuchi, I don’t think that’s the issue here.” That was Kyouraku, as Kira’s voice deserted him fully a second time. “Kira, pull yourself together and stand before the meeting like a good boy, will you? We haven’t called you here to discuss your rank or otherwise. We want to hear what you told Soi Fon — if you’re composed enough to relate it a second time.”

“What I told… Soi Fon-taichou?”

“About your being inside Central 46.” Yamamoto agreed, and Kira faltered.

“I broke a rule by being there, too, didn’t I?” He murmured, agitation in his gaze. “First I drew my sword on Hinamori-kun, then I

entered Central 46, then I drew it on…”

“Enough of that.” Hitsugaya cut across him brusquely before he could finish his sentence. “Stop focusing on the unnecessary stuff. You were inside Central 46 when I got there… we both know what happened from thereon in. What we don’t know is what happened before. *Why* you were there. And more importantly, what Aizen and Ichimaru were doing.”

Kira hesitated, slowly pulling himself to his feet and absently dusting down his *hakama*.

“Take your time.” Unohana Retsu, Captain of the Fourth murmured reassuringly, and something in her gentleness gave him new strength. Slowly he nodded.

“Ichimaru-taichou let me out of my cell.” He said slowly, his voice breaking slightly as he remembered the events once more. “I didn’t know what else I should be doing, so I… I went with him. He concealed my whereabouts and I… I didn’t try to disobey him. He said he had need of me… so I did as I was told.”

“And Central 46?”

“He called me there, and let me in.” Kira said honestly. “That was the first time I saw it… the blood on the walls and the floor. They were already dead by that time — I swear I don’t know who killed them, what happened, or when.”

“The blood was dry by the time I saw it.” Hitsugaya said frankly. “If Kira got there a short while before me, then that’s what he would’ve seen, too. Aizen or Ichimaru — or both — probably killed Central 46. Perhaps Tousen was a part of it as well… but probably, noone else.”

“But still, *you* chose to stay there?” Kurotsuchi was clearly looking to make trouble, and Kira tensed, eying the unpredictable 12-Bantai Captain warily. “In that chamber surrounded by blood? Instead of reporting the scene to a superior officer, you decided to play along in the little charade — is that what you’re saying?”

His eyes glittered coldly in triumph.

“It seems I will have to start crafting a replacement officer, after all.”

“With… with all respect, Kurotsuchi-taichou, I w… I was acting on the orders of m… my Captain.”

“A man who was a traitor to Soul Society!”

“But I… I didn’t know.” Kira’s voice faltered, and Kurotsuchi sent him a predatorial glance.

“As a Vice Captain, that answer is unforgivable.” He said firmly.

“Kurotsuchi, enough.” Ukitake said warningly. “Kira is not being interrogated as a prisoner or a suspect. We were all misled, after all, by Aizen’s appearance of good faith.”

“Were we? Were we indeed?” Kurotsuchi rubbed his false chin, his beady eyes darting across to where the older Captain stood.

“Kurotsuchi, are you suggesting that you suspected Aizen’s treason from the start?” Ukitake’s eyes widened, and Kyouraku’s lips twitched into a lazy smile.

“In which case, perhaps we ought to review *Kurotsuchi’s* position as a squad Captain, if he knowingly concealed criminal activity from the rest of Seireitei’s bigwigs.” He said indolently, casting Kurotsuchi an amused glance.

Kurotsuchi bristled.

“I never said any such thing!” He said sharply. “I only intimated that a subordinate officer with constant close contact to an offender must surely have some inkling that a crime is taking place! I had no interest in the three who left us — and continue to have no interest in them even now. But for someone like *this*…”

At which point he extended a thin finger in Kira’s direction, the sharp edge of his long, pointed nail almost touching the edge of the Vice Captain’s sleeve,

“It should not be so hard to figure out when someone he’s apparently close to is acting in the wrong.”

“I don’t think that’s the material point.” Ukitake shook his head, as Kira flinched back at the criticism once more levelled his way. “I’m sure Kira has already considered all these things for himself — after all, we are not discussing a rank and file Shinigami but a Vice Captain with a proven record of academic excellence and good, loyal service. I’m sure he’s asked himself all those questions already — even regarding matters which cannot possibly have been his fault.”

Kira flushed at this unexpected praise, eying Ukitake in surprise. The Captain was unusually pale, he noticed, even for him, and for some reason this struck him particularly. He was clearly not in full health, yet he had struggled to attend the meeting anyway. Had this been for his benefit? Kira didn’t know — yet deep down he suspected

that it was probably the case. Just as he had attended the meeting where Renji's conduct had been debated, he had forced himself to attend this one also, on the off-chance that somehow he could be of some help.

Kira pursed his lips pensively, as vague recollections of 13-Bantai's last Vice Captain crossed through his thoughts.

Shiba Kaien was dead, and had been some time now. Though Kira had never been close enough to either him or his Captain to know for sure, his sharp mind had quickly made the connection between that fact and the interest Ukitake had continued to take in other squads' serving officers. Even though as yet 13-Bantai was the only squad lacking a Vice Captain among its ranks, Kira felt that Ukitake was a Captain in whom a Shinigami could place his full faith — and never have it betrayed. This sharp contrast to Ichimaru's recent conduct struck a fresh blow against the wound in his heart, and despite himself his brows drew together in a troubled frown.

If Ukitake-taichou had been my Captain, none of this would ever have happened.

"The heart of this matter is that it's easy to see with hindsight the things we can't see as they occur." Ukitake added now, casting Kira a smile as he did so. "The fact is that we only have hindsight — and for that reason, we need his help. Even if he didn't realise it at the time, he may possibly be the one person in Soul Society who knew anything more about Aizen, Tousen and Ichimaru's actions before they occurred."

"I wish I did know more, but I don't know that I do." Kira admitted, glancing at the floor. "Aizen-taichou was there, with Ichimaru-taichou. Tousen-taichou was never there — I didn't know he was even involved until Kotetsu-fukutaichou's announcement was put out all across Seireitei."

"Tousen was with me, playin' a few battle games." Zaraki spoke up insolently at this point, his fingers brushing the hilt of his sword as he remembered. "It was jus' getting interesting, too… before things kicked off on Soukyoku Hill."

"So only Ichimaru and Aizen were inside Central 46 when you were, Kira?" Komamura asked softly, and Kira nodded his head.

"Aizen-taichou must've used his sword on me, because it was like the people in the court came back to life." He agreed. "I didn't know if I was seeing things, or going crazy… maybe I thought I was losing my mind. I'd been feeling… that way since I raised my sword against

Hinamori-kun, so it wouldn't have surprised me if I'd hallucinated the whole thing. The only thing I could do was obey Ichimaru-taichou's orders. He was my Captain. I didn't know who was right and who was wrong… I just… followed."

"And they sent you as a decoy, to delay Hitsugaya reaching the inner chambers of Central 46?" Yamamoto asked, and Kira nodded his head.

"Y… yes, sir. I think so, sir."

"Do you know why they needed the extra time?"

There was a moment of dead silence, then Kira let out a heavy sigh.

"I think… to kill… Hinamori-kun." He said unsteadily. "Even though Ichimaru-taichou told me that… that she wouldn't be hurt. Even though… I had a bad feeling about it. Ichimaru-taichou said something about a… a squad reunion. I think it was what Aizen-taichou wanted — to have Hinamori-kun alone so he could…"

At this moment words failed him, and he swallowed hard, getting his emotions back under his control.

"I was ordered to take Hitsugaya-taichou and Matsumoto-fukutaichou away from Central 46 for long enough for them to do — whatever it was involving Hinamori-kun." He whispered. "But I was worried about her. So I told Hitsugaya-taichou that she was in danger, and told him to go back there more quickly than I was supposed to. Then I… I drew my weapon and… I fought with… Matsumoto-fukutaichou. Because Ichimaru-taichou didn't want her involved in it, and I… didn't know what else to do."

He looked troubled.

"I think Aizen-taichou wanted it to look like… like Hinamori-kun and Hitsugaya-taichou fought each other, because he was trying to frame Hitsugaya-taichou for his murder. And then he and Ichimaru-taichou and Tousen-taichou could have more easily escaped, taken custody of Kuchiki-san and… and the Hougyoku."

"And we might yet be none the wiser." Ukitake murmured. "What about you, Kira? What was your role to be after holding off Matsumoto?"

"I… I don't know." Kira hesitated, loath to say the words that had been taunting him ever since he had realised how much he had been betrayed. However, with the eyes of so many Captains boring into him, he gritted his teeth, forcing him to voice the fears out loud.

“I think Ichimaru-taichou thought that Hitsugaya-taichou or Matsumoto-fukutaichou would kill me.” He said unevenly. “When… when I think about it, there were… lots of times where Hinamori-kun and I… where swords were drawn and where they might have wanted us to be killed. We… we were in the way, in the end. And so I think that’s what they intended to do. To deal with… with her and with me. And that would be the end of that problem.”

There was a moment of silence, then Ukitake sighed, reaching out to place a hand on Kira’s arm.

“It’s taken courage to relate any of this to us, hasn’t it?” He asked gently, and Kira glanced at him in surprise.

“Even though you could be gravely punished, you’ve still stood before us and told us honestly what you know.” Ukitake continued. “It was the right decision, Kira. Whatever mistakes you made before — this was the right decision.”

“Providing the boy is telling us the whole truth.” Kurotsuchi said cruelly, and Kira bit his lip.

“If he hadn’t’ve warned me, Hinamori would’ve died.” Hitsugaya said bluntly. “Whatever Ichimaru’s orders, I got back there an’ it took Aizen by surprise, how quickly I was there. He wasn’t expecting to see me that soon… I don’t think Kira’s told us any lies, Kurotsuchi.”

“Even so, a lot of things are my fault.” Kira hung his head. “And I wasn’t brave, Ukitake-taichou. Truthfully, I was afraid to say anything at first. Then, when I saw Soi Fon-taichou inside Central 46, I… it seemed… I needed to tell someone the truth.”

“Kira, did you have any idea of what Ichimaru was involved in before that point?” Kyouraku asked quietly, and slowly Kira shook his head.

“I… just followed. I didn’t ask questions.” He murmured. “Even when Aizen-taichou was… when we thought he was murdered, I still… I defended my Captain, because I didn’t believe that he would do something like that. I believed in him. He always looked out for me. So I didn’t ask.”

“It’s not easy for a Vice Captain to stand apart from his Captain, when his Captain gives an order.” Ukitake reflected quietly, and Yamamoto nodded.

“There have been instances of it, in recent weeks.” He responded, his gaze flitting to Byakuya, who tensed slightly at the attention, but made no attempt to speak. “But, I’m glad to say, those matters have

already been closed."

Kira cast Byakuya a glance, inwardly wondering how Renji had ever found the courage to raise his sword against his Captain in the first place.

He gathered his wits, returning his attention to the Sou Taichou.

"Sir, please, what… what will happen now? I mean, 3-Bantai has no Captain, and I don't… I don't feel like… I'm not strong enough to take charge of anything on my own."

"For the time being, there is nothing to do about that." Yamamoto said firmly. "There has been no time to discuss arrangements for the three squads who are lacking their Captains. 5-Bantai is lacking a Vice Captain also, until Hinamori Momo is recovered enough to regain office — or a suitable replacement officer is found. For the time being, Kira, you must do what you can to support 3-Bantai in this difficult time."

His eyes narrowed.

"If you do not feel that you can at least do that, then perhaps we will all review your position as Vice Captain of a Gotei 13 squad." He murmured, a faintly ominous glimmer in his gaze. "That is up to you. I wish to see what people can do, after all. Not the things they cannot."

Kira flushed red, bowing low before his senior once more.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I'll do my best." He gabbled, and Yamamoto let out a sigh.

"Hitsugaya — you have nothing further to add on this matter? Since you were also present…"

"Nothing that Kira hasn't already said." Hitsugaya said dismissively.

"Except, of course, why you and your Vice Captain didn't mention this confrontation before." Soi Fon's eyes burned into his, but Hitsugaya seemed unconcerned, meeting her glare with an equally icy one of his own.

"It wasn't important, with Hinamori near death and Aizen and the others taking off to Hueco Mundo." He said frankly. "Kira's an idiot and a coward, perhaps. He's not a traitor. And besides, he *did* warn me that Hinamori was in danger. If I hadn't got there when I did, maybe she would've been killed. I'll never know. But Kira *did* warn me. And he could've been killed too, for doing that. So there was no reason for me to report it. Besides, Kira wasn't in his wits when he challenged

either of us. I don't know what Aizen did to him, with that demon sword — or if it was Ichimaru who was to blame. But Matsumoto's said it too. That he wasn't right."

Kira stared at Hitsugaya in disbelief, and the small Captain shrugged.

"Don't look at me like that." He said gruffly. "You think Matsumoto'd let me off the hook, if I punished you after you crawled to her so pitifully to beg for her forgiveness?"

"For the time being, those things are neither here nor there." Yamamoto raised his hand, to indicate that the matter was settled. "Kira, return to your squad. Put on your insignia and prove that you are worthy to continue as Vice Captain of 3-Bantai. From hereon in, I will be paying attention to you… consider this the first step on a new path. The Winter will bring tests for many people, after all — you are one of those for whom the test will probably be the greatest."

His moustache twitched slightly, and Kira half-wondered if the old man had smiled at him.

"You are dismissed." Was all that was said, however, and Kira did not wait for anyone to call him back. Bowing a second time, he scrambled hastily for the door, hurrying out into the cool fresh air as he drew gulps of it into his lungs.

It was over, and he had survived, although he was sweating like crazy and shaking like a leaf.

"From hereon in, huh." He murmured. "I guess we'll see… if I really can be of any use to the Gotei 13, after all."

"Well, that was a beautiful waste of our time."

Back in the Captain's Chamber, Kurotsuchi let out a derisive snort. "No wonder Ichimaru was able to run riot and do as he pleased, if he had such a quivering wreck for a Vice Captain as that."

"The matter is closed, Kurotsuchi." Yamamoto said firmly, his gaze sliding across towards the scientist who, despite himself, realised it was better to let the matter drop. "Kira Izuru is as Hitsugaya said — a coward and a fool but not a traitor. Cowardice and foolishness can both be forgiven and overcome — and with things as they are, we need every man we have. It is up to him, now. We will move on."

He glanced back towards Soi Fon.

“Soi Fon, I believe you have another matter to raise?”

“Yes, sir.” Soi Fon agreed levelly. “Last night 2-Bantai received communication from Shihouin Yoruichi-sama in the Real World. She wanted permission to open the Senkei Gate at the earliest opportunity.”

“To open the… Senkei Gate?” Ukitake frowned. “Once again?”

“Yes.” Soi Fon nodded her head.

“Why all of a sudden?” Kyouraku’s brows knitted together. “There’s nothing happening in the Real World that needs our attention, surely? That young kid Kurosaki seems capable enough of handling the worst of the ordinary Hollows, and in the meantime, Urahara and Yoruichi-san are on hand if things become sticky. Aren’t they?”

“Urahara Kisuke is technically a traitor to Soul Society, too.” Kurotsuchi put in waspishly, and Kyouraku shot him a pained glance.

“A traitor whose exile happened to work out very nicely for *you*, in fact.” He said evenly. “Pipe down, Kurotsuchi. The less you say about rule-breaking the better.”

“What are you talking about?” Kurotsuchi affected a wounded expression. “Of all people, I knew Urahara Kisuke better than anyone else here. And…”

“This is not a discussion on the guilt or otherwise of Urahara Kisuke.” Yamamoto rumbled, holding up his hands as he glared at his unruly subordinates. “Though there are elements of that case which now must be brought back into question, I do not see the need to focus on century old decisions when we have far more pressing matters to discuss. Soi Fon,”

He turned his attention back to the 2-Bantai Captain, who was also glaring daggers at Kurotsuchi for his constant interruptions.

“Will you explain what exactly Shihouin Yoruichi was wanting, when she contacted you last night?”

“She wants us to admit the boy… Kurosaki Ichigo… back into Soul Society for a short period of time.” Soi Fon said simply, and at this, several of the Captains became surprised, exchanging glances of confusion.

“Readmit him? When we just sent him home a matter of weeks ago?” Hitsugaya demanded.

“Suits me.” Zaraki smirked, patting his sword hilt once more. “He

still owes me a re-match, after all."

"But why?" Ukitake's brows creased. "Everything is well in the Real World? There's been no residual activity from Aizen or anything like that?"

"Yoruichi-sama didn't say anything specific." Soi Fon shook her head. "It was a hurried communication and she didn't have a chance to relay the details. All she told me was that there was a matter of some urgency that needed looking into and that she wanted to send Kurosaki to Soul Society in order to do that. That's all."

"This isn't a holiday camp for lost children." Hitsugaya muttered. "Does he know that? That now things are settled, he hasn't a need to come and go here as he pleases."

"It concerns me what kind of effect it might have on his real life, if he were to spend too much time in this place." Ukitake added.

"But if Yoruichi-sama believes there's a need, I think we should allow it." Soi Fon said resolutely, and Kurotsuchi smirked.

"Of course. You *would* say that, Soi Fon." He murmured derisively, and Soi Fon's eyes narrowed to near slits.

"Do you have a problem with that fact, Kurotsuchi Mayuri?" She demanded, and Yamamoto sighed, clapping his hands together once more.

"A matter of some urgency that needs looking into." He echoed. "And she gave no indication what that matter was?"

"Not specifically." Soi Fon shook her head. "Only that it involved the other boy — the Quincy."

"The Quincy, huh?" Kurotsuchi's expression underwent a complete change, and a slow smile spread across his lips. "Then that makes it entirely different."

"How so?" Kyouraku asked, and Kurotsuchi sent him a condescending glance.

"You're not a scientist, so you wouldn't understand the fascinating elements of studying people such as the Quincy." He said glibly. "Besides, we are here to protect human kind, are we not? If there's a human being in trouble, surely we should at least hear them out and see what the situation might be?"

"You're keen all of a sudden." Hitsugaya's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and Kurotsuchi shrugged.

“Am I wrong?” He asked lightly. “Is it not our duty, when all is said and done? And more to the point, don’t the Shinigami still take an active interest in the behaviour of surviving Quincy? As far as I can see, this is something we should investigate fully. And if one like Shihouin Yoruichi believes so, who are we to argue the point?”

Yamamoto’s glance drifted across to Byakuya, who as yet had made not attempt to speak during the meeting.

“Kuchiki, what say you?” He asked gruffly, and Byakuya looked startled, meeting the Sou Taichou’s gaze.

“Sou Taichou?”

“You clashed swords with this boy in unhappy circumstances. Is there anything you have to say about Yoruichi’s request?”

Byakuya’s lips thinned, but slowly he shook his head.

“I will abide by whatever decision is made.” He said softly. “That is all.”

“In which case, noone has a violent objection to the idea?”

There were murmurs of assent, and Yamamoto nodded his head.

“Very well.” He reflected. “Soi Fon, you may return contact to Yoruichi and tell her that the Senkei Gate will be opened at 2200 hours this evening. She can send the boy then, and hopefully, with a full explanation of whatever is amiss. Kuchiki…”

He turned his gaze back to the 6-Bantai Captain,

“Your sister is the one who knows the boy best, and she is currently outside of her squad on account of her not having recovered her *zanpakutou* yet — correct?”

“Yes, sir.” Byakuya’s grey eyes clouded as he interpreted the meaning behind the question, but he made no demur.

“In which case, she seems the best choice of Shinigami to meet him on his arrival.” Yamamoto said decidedly. “Everyone else has duties to attend to, after all.”

“Kuchiki Rukia isn’t even a seated Shinigami.” Kurotsuchi objected. “Is that really the best idea, Sou Taichou?”

“It’s my final decision.” Yamamoto’s gaze became steely. “Kuchiki Rukia will be at the Senkei Gate to greet Kurosaki Ichigo when he arrives, and to ensure that, while he is here, he attends to all of Soul Society’s regulations in full. Kuchiki, you may tell her this, since I

believe she is still staying with you."

"Yes, sir." Byakuya did not look pleased, but he did not object. "I will tell her directly I leave this chamber."

"In which case, the meeting is dismissed." Yamamoto said firmly. "All Captains return to your squads. We still have a lot of repair work to do.

Chapter Ten: One's True Form

Chapter Ten: One’s True Form

“So, Nii-sama’s already up and about then, I suppose?”

Rukia pulled her dressing gown more tightly around her slim frame, stifling a yawn as she met the gaze of one of Byakuya’s many faceless, nameless household staff. It was early in the morning and she had awoken just a short time ago to find her brother’s retainers all hard at work, but no sign of the enigmatic nobleman himself, and, as the maids had cleared away the plates from her breakfast, she had at last voiced the question aloud.

Since she had been back in Soul Society, she had been something between a guest and a prisoner in the rambling Kuchiki estate. As soon as he was fit to do so, Byakuya had given orders that her convalescence should be spent, at least initially, within the safe confines of the family manor.

Rukia had not liked to tell him that she wanted nothing more than to return to her squad and her training. Although the invitation to remain had been more of a Captain’s austere command, she knew deep down that Byakuya was trying — in his own way — to make amends for the turbulence of the past few weeks by offering her his direct protection. It was one way by which he could fully show Soul Society that he had acknowledged her — and that whatever rifts had opened up between them were now well and truly in the past.

He was not a man given to shows of emotion, and Rukia had not expected him to change just because Soul Society had almost collapsed into utter anarchy. But now she at least felt she understood her complicated, distant brother a little more, and for now, that would have to do.

Yet, with her Rukongai roots, there was nowhere she felt more out of place than within the noble manor that had taken her in forty years ago.

Still, at least it gives me a chance to try out all of that fancy language I learnt when masquerading as one of Ichigo’s classmates.

She sighed.

Although it isn’t half so much fun when he’s not there, glaring at me all

pissed off for doing it.

"Byakuya-sama has already left to attend to 6-Bantai's morning duties and inspections." The manservant bowed his head low before her. "He instructed me to make you aware of his absence, Rukia-sama, and that until he returns he hopes that you will take your ease and make full use of the mansion. After all, he hopes that you consider it as much your home as it is his."

Some home.
Rukia bit back the urge to voice the thought aloud, instead summoning a sunny smile as she nodded in the manservant's direction. They really were all alike, she reflected ruefully. Each of them perfectly trained, impeccably mannered and there to serve the family's every need. Only a few of her brother's more senior retainers were people whose faces were distinctive, yet knowing as she did that they mostly disapproved of her, she had not tried to find out more about them. The Kuchiki manor was, after all, more of a gold-plated prison than anything else. She had always thought so, since the moment the cage doors had shut behind her and she had been officially inducted into the clan. But now she realised that, since Hisana's untimely death, it had been the same for Byakuya, also. And that small thread of perception was something she had begun to cling onto, hopeful that, even if he never spoke of it again, she and he had reached an understanding that, up to that point had seemed impossible.

"I suppose I could go for a walk, and see how the repair work is going. Maybe even head to see Ukitake-taichou and report in to him. I haven't really been able to do that, since it all died down."

"With all respect, Rukia-sama, Byakuya-sama gave me strict instructions to ensure you had everything you needed here." The manservant bowed his head again. "We are entirely at your disposal, but your Lord Brother has advised us against allowing you to leave the manor. He feels that it might harm your convalescence, and he is eager to see you make a full recovery as soon as possible."

"He did?" Rukia was startled. "Why would he say something like that? Surely he wouldn't mind if I just went to speak to Ukitake-taichou? After all…"

"His instructions were quite explicit, Rukia-sama." The manservant was firm, and Rukia could tell from his expression that if he dared to go against Byakuya's orders, the consequences would be severe.

Is that the value he places on my life, now?

Rukia frowned, twisting her fingers together absently as she considered this.
Or is it just that he's afraid to be left alone again? My sister isn't here, after all. Is he afraid to come back and find I'm not, either?
She smiled slightly, ridiculing herself for this foolish idea. Yet even so she felt there was some grain of truth in it. She was Rukia, not Hisana. She was the little sister he had never asked for — the obligation to a dead wife who he had clearly loved with all his heart and soul. But whether it was obligation or genuine fondness, Rukia knew that Byakuya had taken it to heart. And as she reflected on this, she let out a heavy sigh, knowing that she would be unlikely to leave the mansion that day.

When Kuchiki Byakuya gave an order, after all, there were few Shinigami worth their salt who would dare defy it.

"All right. I guess if that's what Nii-sama said, that's what I'll do." She said at length, and relief flooded the retainer's expression.

"Yes, Rukia-sama." He agreed respectfully. "If you have any needs, please, don't hesitate to call for us. We will be there momentarily."

With that he bowed again, then withdrew, and Rukia sighed again, making her way over to the screen divide that led out onto the small wooden balcony.

As she did so, she caught sight of a familiar figure crossing the dusty walkway in front of the house, a cluster of black-clad Shinigami in attendance. As she watched, the man raised his hand, clearly giving out orders to each group of six or seven men, and, as they scuttled off to do his bidding, her eyes lit up with hope.

Maybe I can't leave here, but that guy didn't say I couldn't have people come visit me.

"Yo, Renji! What are you up to!"

With that thought in mind, she leant out over the wooden barrier that divided the third floor balcony from the sheer drop below, waving her hand to catch her comrade's attention.

Despite himself, the 6-Bantai Vice Captain paused, shielding his gaze from the sun as he gazed up towards the origin of the shout. He seemed preoccupied, she thought, and she pursed her lips, remembering what the manservant had told her.

Nii-sama left early, and Renji looks like he's got something on his mind. I wonder if 6-Bantai are that behind with their duties, or if it's something else? Nii-sama isn't one hundred percent fit yet, even if he's pretending he

is. Maybe Renji's having more work shoved at him because of that.

She hung precariously over the rail, casting her old friend a quizzical look.

"Is something going on that I don't know about? Everyone seems to be busier than usual this morning, and Nii-sama left before dawn, according to the household staff. What's happening?"

"Nothing you need worry your head about." Renji responded gruffly. "Squad duties, s'all."

"Squad duties?" Rukia frowned. "But Nii-sama…"

"Captain's meeting." Renji cut across her question briskly. "Which leaves 6-Bantai to me."

"Ah-hah, so Nii-sama *has* forgiven you for attacking him, then." Rukia reflected, and Renji snorted.

"That or he's punishin' me still by givin' me more work'n I've ever had t'do in my life." He muttered. "Be glad you ain't a Vice Captain, Rukia — I ain't kidding. I had about three hours sleep last night thanks to Taichou's new 'delegation' policy."

"That's a good sign though, right?" Rukia reasoned. "I guess it means he trusts you."

"Like hell he does." Renji grumbled, and Rukia wondered at the flicker of resentment that stirred suddenly in her friend's stormy eyes. "I'm tellin' you, it's a shitload more twisted'n that."

"Twisted?"

"Yeah. Freakin' twisted."

Renji faltered, glancing around him surreptitiously at that moment as if he expected his Captain to descend on him for complaining, and Rukia laughed.

"You shouldn't say things like that in public places if you don't want people to hear them." She teased him. "But if he's in a meeting, he's not watching either one of us. You want to take a break? I'll have one or other of Nii-sama's servants make tea, and I'm bored rigid convalescing on my own."

"No can do." Renji shook his head firmly, although Rukia could clearly read his reluctance. "I told you. I got a list longer'n I'll ever finish up before the Sou-Taichou lets them loose, an' I'd be in the shit for sure if he caught me loiterin' round this place when I've got other things I ought t'be doing."

He frowned, his lips thinning.

“He’s keepin’ a damn close eye on me, if you want t’know.” He added.

“Not even five minutes?” Rukia was disappointed. “I’m not supposed to leave the mansion, but I thought it would be all right if someone came to visit me.”

Renji snorted.

“Just stay where you are and regain your friggin’ strength already, okay?” He told her bluntly. “Then he’ll let you out to play again, won’t he? An’ stop yellin’ down like that. It’s hurting my neck starin’ up at you like this, an’ you’ll fall off that damn rail if you lean out any further.”

“Do you think I’m that clumsy?” Rukia demanded, neatly perching on the polished rim of the wood. “Well? I’m bored. Nii-sama’s pretty much locked the door and thrown away the key, so if noone comes to visit me, it gets lonely up here. Besides, it’s been at least three days since I even saw you face to face. What’ve you been so busy with these past few days that you can’t spare me even ten minutes of your time, Fuku-taichou-dono?”

Renji faltered, a strange look crossing his features at her question, and Rukia frowned, resting both hands on the railing as she pondered vaulting over the wood and launching herself down onto the ground below. It would get her a scolding, no doubt, if she was to break bounds, yet something in Renji’s troubled expression had caught her attention.
*I’ve never seen him look quite like **that** before.*

At length, Renji seemed to stir himself, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Duties, is all.” He said shortly. “Jus’ do as the Taichou told you, Rukia, an’ he’ll let you out of the prison. An’ when I got a moment to spare, I’ll come see you — but right now, I don’t see that bein’ before the end of the week, so don’t hold your breath. All right? Not all of us can jus’ sit back on our asses enjoyin’ the life of luxury, after all.”

With that he was gone in the direction some of his squad had disappeared moments earlier, and Rukia slipped back down off the rail, resting her elbows on it as she pondered on Renji’s strange behaviour.

“Is Nii-sama still mad at him, then, that he’s giving him extra work?” She wondered. “Renji did it for my sake, so I hope not. I’d feel

guilty… maybe I should speak to him when he comes back to the mansion. Renji wasn't wrong, after all. And maybe Nii-sama's more likely to listen to me now than he did before."

"What are you daydreaming about, Rukia?"

The sound of her brother's voice made the young Shinigami visibly jump, swinging around guiltily to see him standing in the doorway, his *haori* swaying slightly in the breeze. He was impeccably turned out as ever, and even if his face was still a touch paler than usual from the injuries he had suffered in battle, his expression gave no indication that he was feeling any pain.

At her surprise, he raised an eyebrow.

"Something is troubling you?" He asked softly, and Rukia shook her head hastily.

"No, nothing. I'm sorry. I was just… I saw Renji. He seemed very busy, and I wondered… what 6-Bantai were up to today."

Byakuya's expression became thoughtful, and he shook his head.

"Renji has plenty of work to do." He said dismissively. "I would sooner you did not trouble him with trivial things, Rukia. There is, after all, a lot to be caught up on."

"Nii-sama…" Rukia faltered, then gathered her courage, meeting her brother's grey eyes with her dark ones. "You're not… *cross* with Renji, are you? I mean, I know he turned his sword on you and that's an unforgivable thing for any Shinigami to do to a Captain, let alone their own and let alone when they're Vice Captain, but…"

"But he did it for your sake, is that what you want to tell me?" Byakuya asked softly, and Rukia reddened, nodding her head.

"You need not concern yourself with Renji's situation." Byakuya raised his hand, dismissing the subject with a flick of his fingers. "The matter is fully resolved. Soul Society has decided that no punishment will be cast on people who acted out of line during the recent disturbance, if they acted in order to prevent a travesty of justice. That being the case, I have no reason to complain. Soul Society has decided. I will not go against that decision."

Rukia sighed, sinking down onto the wood of the balcony.

"You still have some concerns?" Byakuya pressed gently, and Rukia shrugged.

"I've just never seen him quite so busy. That's all."

“There are two kinds of Vice Captain, Rukia.” Byakuya said frankly. “Those who will always be second, and those who will one day be first. Renji has achieved Bankai, but that is only one step towards taking the *haori*. I wish to find out how many more steps he can take, that is all. If he is not equal to it, then he will never be anything more than he is now.”

“So you think he might be a Captain one day, as well?” Rukia’s eyes widened with surprise. “Nii-sama, really?”

“That rests with him. I will not speculate on things which are as yet as far away as the moon.” Byakuya said dismissively. “In the meantime, he has his duties to attend to, and you are supposed to be convalescing. Your spiritual powers will return, but it will take time.”

Rukia sighed again.

“I know that.” She admitted. “And I’m grateful for all you’ve done for me, Nii-sama. I really truly am. I just… I suppose I’m not used to doing nothing. That’s all. I’ve never been that kind of person — and even without my powers returned, I must be useful for something.”

Byakuya’s eyes narrowed to slits, and for a moment he gazed at her, his expression unreadable. Then a faint smile touched his lips.

“Hisana was the same way.” He murmured, more to himself than to her, and Rukia’s eyes became big at the uncharacteristic emotion in his tones. It was gone in an instant, but Rukia knew that she had not imagined it, and despite her frustration, she felt warm inside.

It would take a long time — perhaps till the end of time itself. But she was sure that now, somehow, she and her strange adoptive brother would reach a proper understanding.

“If you wish something to occupy you, then my meeting this morning may well have provided something.” Byakuya was speaking again, and Rukia gazed at him in surprise.

“The Captain’s meeting? Why? What can that have to do with me?”

“Apparently, a good deal.” Byakuya’s expression darkened slightly. “It is an order, however, so I cannot contravene it. No matter how sorely I am tempted.”

“Nii… sama?”

“Last night, it seems, the Captain of 2-Bantai received a communication from the Real World.” Byakuya continued, and Rukia stared at him in surprise.

“From… the Real World? From… Ichigo?”

Byakuya’s eyes narrowed further, and slowly he shook his head.

“From Shihouin Yoruichi.” He said flatly, his disapproval clear. “However, it does relate to that young fool Kurosaki Ichigo, yes.”

“But… I don’t understand.” Rukia was bewildered. “What has…”

“Yoruichi’s communication was a request to grant the boy entry to Soul Society.” Byakuya said quietly. “And this morning’s meeting agreed to grant it.”

“Ichigo… is coming back here?” Rukia reeled, then, “But why?”

“I have no idea whatsoever.” Byakuya responded, in a tone that told her that he cared even less. “But I have been instructed to convey this message to you from the Sou Taichou. The Senkei Gate will be opened at 2200 hours this evening. Since you are the one best acquainted with him, and since he clearly can’t be trusted to run loose around Soul Society on his own, you are to be there to meet him. Whatever his mission here, Rukia, you are to see that it is of short duration. Do you understand?”

“Ichigo’s coming back here? And the Sou Taichou wants *me* to…?” Rukia faltered, then nodded her head.

“I understand, Nii-sama.” She said soberly. “Everyone else is far too busy, and I have nothing else to do, so it might as well be me. Thank you.”

“Well, I don’t pretend I approve of it.” Byakuya said heavily. “He does not belong here, after all. But it is an order, and I will tolerate it as such. Still, you can tell him from me that if he proceeds to make any more trouble for you or anyone here, he will be renewing his acquaintance with Senbonzakura.”

His hand brushed his sword hilt, and Rukia held up her hands hurriedly.

“I promise, Nii-sama, I’ll keep him out of trouble.” She said hastily. “Whatever he needs here, I’ll find out — and I’ll resolve it so he can go back home again. I swear.”

“Going to Soul Society?”

Ichigo almost choked on his tea, staring at Urahara in surprise. “Now? *Tonight?* Shit, some advance warning would be nice! Why am I just hearing about this — what’s the deal?”

“We only decided it last night.” Yoruichi — once more in the form of a lithe black cat leapt down onto the table in front of him, settling herself between the sugar bowl and his mug and curling her tail thoughtfully around her paws. “Don’t complain, Ichigo. You wanted something done, didn’t you? This is something.”

“But what about Ishida?” Ichigo cast a glance across at the Quincy who was curled up in the far corner, apparently reading one of Urahara’s many dusty volumes with avid interest. However, from the tension in the teenager’s thin frame, Ichigo knew he was paying attention to the conversation, and he frowned, picking up a lump of sugar and tossing it in his classmate’s direction.

“Oi! Ishida! What’re you doing in all of this?”

“Do you have to throw food at me?” Uryuu bristled, lowering his book and glaring at the redhead in irritation. “You could just ask, without resorting to animal behaviour.”

“It’s not so easy for Ishida-san to cross into Soul Society as it is for you, so for now you’ll go alone.” Urahara said smoothly, before Ichigo could retort. “It takes a little longer to prepare a gate that will allow him into Soul Society without severing his soul’s link to his body, after all. You remember that, don’t you, from the first time you crossed over?”

“Oh. Yeah. I remember.” Ichigo sighed, sinking back on his heels. “Okay, so I’ll go on my own. No sweat. And once I’m there? You want me to see if I can find out anything… but what am I trying to find out? We don’t know shit. Or at least, if we do, the only one who knows it is Ishida. An’ he ain’t said anything much to help.”

“If you stopped and listened, I might tell you something that was.” Uryuu was clearly in a thoroughly bad mood, and Ichigo frowned, half-wondering what his classmate had been forced to endure during the past 24 hours trapped within the Shouten’s unpredictable premises.

“So spit it out already, then.” He said frankly. “If there’s something you think I should know.”

“It seems that Ishida had another dream last night.” Yoruichi put in softly. “About this Shinigami.”

“And you remember this one?” Ichigo demanded. Uryuu nodded, folding his arms pointedly across his chest.

“Yes. I remember it. I remember it pretty clearly.” He said coldly, and Ichigo grimaced.

“Then spill already.” He said tiredly. “If I’m goin’, I’m goin’ on your behalf. You could at least quit bein’ so damn uppity an’ give me a break.”

Uryuu sighed, reaching up to remove his glasses and rubbing his temples.

“The guy’s name is Shizuki.” He said at length. “At least, that was the guy in my dream. He was a Captain of the Gotei 13, and his name was Shizuki. That’s what one of the other Captains called him.”

“Shizuki.” Ichigo looked blank. “Urahara-san? Yoruichi-san? Does that mean anything to you?”

Yoruichi’s golden eyes narrowed slightly, but she did not answer, and Ichigo turned his attention to the shopkeeper.

“Urahara-san?”

“If there was a Captain by that name, it was before my time.” Urahara replied glibly. “But there was a name which I did recognise. Ishida-san, would you tell Kurosaki-san the identity of the other Captain in your dream?”

“He was a Kuchiki. Kuchiki… something. Gin… something.” Ishida pursed his lips. “It wasn’t Byakuya-san, but I guess… he could’ve been a relative.”

“A Kuchiki?” Ichigo stared. “One of Rukia’s clan are involved in this?”

“Kuchiki Ginrei was Byakuya’s grandfather.” Yoruichi said simply. “He was Captain of 6-Bantai and head of the Kuchiki-ke up until his death, and then Byakuya took on both positions. He more or less raised Byakuya, if my memory serves me correctly.”

“Raised him?” Ichigo frowned. “Shit, what happened to parents?”

“Byakuya’s died.” Yoruichi responded. “Ginrei was a well respected Captain, however.”

She flicked her tail in Uryuu’s direction.

“From the description Ishida gave us, it sounds like it really was Kuchiki Ginrei that he dreamt about.” She added. “Which adds to the possibility that the other things he dreamed about are also true. That being the case, somewhere in Soul Society’s archives, there may well be reference to these events. If Ishida believes he hallucinated the massacre of the Quincy, then I’d guess we’re talking about two hundred years into Soul Society’s history… there or thereabouts.”

“Which is a time before either one of us were Captains of squads, before you ask, Kurosaki-san.” Urahara bestowed a benign smile on Ichigo, as the redhead had opened his mouth to ask the question. “Kuchiki Ginrei was a Captain at the same time as Yoruichi-san was Captain of 2-Bantai and I was Captain of 12-Bantai. I never knew a Shizuki-taichou. That must have been before my time. But the Kuchiki-ke are also the keepers of the archives I mentioned… that would probably be your first line of enquiry.”

“So you think that, if I ask Byakuya nicely, he might tell me some shit about his family’s history?” Ichigo looked incredulous. “Are you kidding me? If his glares were any colder he could turn a person to ice. He doesn’t like me, an’ there’s no way he’ll do me a favour. If that’s your plan, then there’s no point.”

“If you weren’t so rude, you’d probably find it easier to communicate.” Uryuu put in pettily from his corner. “Byakuya-san is a nobleman, and you treat him like a basketball buddy from the local park. You’ve no delicacy, and that’s why he has no time for you.”

“He always was a hot-tempered, proud little whelp.” Yoruichi reflected absently. “Though the last time I saw him, it looked to me like he’d got his temper under control at the very least. It’s worth a try, Ichigo. You did help save his sister from death, after all.”

“And there’s nothing you can tell me about this Shizuki dude?” Ichigo demanded. “Nothing at all?”

“I already told you, Kurosaki-san…”

“No, not you.” Ichigo shook his head. “I meant Yoruichi-san. She ain’t said a thing about it, yet.”

“In my dream, there was the name of another Captain, too.” Uryuu remembered. “Shihouin. Shihouin-taichou, Kuchiki-taichou and Shizuki-taichou. Those were the three Shinigami names mentioned.”

“Then your family *must* know something about this too, surely?” Ichigo pounced, and Yoruichi sighed, getting daintily to her feet and leaping neatly up onto the window-sill.

“All I know is hearsay.” She said softly.

“Hearsay’s better than nothing — we’re going on damn dreams so far.” Ichigo pointed out. “Come on, Yoruichi-san. If you know something…”

“I don’t really know.” Yoruichi stretched out on her stomach, resting her head on her paws as she eyed Ichigo through slitted lids. “I

wasn't there to see it, after all."

"But…?"

"The last Shihouin to be Captain of 2-Bantai, before me, died in mysterious circumstances." Yoruichi's tail curled and uncurled, and Ichigo frowned, absorbing the awkwardness in the cat's demeanour as he did so. "2-Bantai has always been somehow connected to my family, although the Captain of the Squad is not necessarily the head of the family. The Shihouin clan is, after all, of equal standing to Byakuya's Kuchiki-ke. However, unlike the Kuchiki-ke, which take their connections to 6-Bantai with deadly seriousness, the Shihouin-ke's focus has always been more on the Special Operations Forces. For that reason, I suppose, 2-Bantai hasn't always been run by the head of the Shihouin clan… just as now Soi Fon has that position in my absence. Even so, however, it does sometimes happen that the two overlap. And even when it doesn't, there are those — like Soi Fon — who were trained and raised to be of service to the Shihouin-ke right from the get-go. That means that there's as much pride tied up in the Shihouin family reputation as there is in the Kuchiki one."

"Meaning?" Ichigo frowned.

"As I said, the last Shihouin to be 2-Bantai's Captain perished in the middle of some kind of mission." Yoruichi responded. "Noone really knows how, or at least, it hasn't been talked about. It was all hushed up because of family pride. But he was on some manoeuvre or mission in the Real World. And that's where he died."

"In the Real World?" Uryuu echoed. "Negotiating with the Quincy?"

"Yes. Probably." Yoruichi replied. "I imagine it was quite scandalous at the time. One of the Noble Families, a Captain of the Gotei 13… that kind of thing didn't happen. It's been assumed that he was killed by marauding Quincy — after all, they revolted quite violently before the final execution order was handed down and carried out. But I always thought the timing of his death was odd."

She stretched and retracted her claws thoughtfully.

"I only looked at the files once or twice, because it was a long dead case by the time I took over the Special Forces and then was pressed into accepting the *haori*, too." She added, casting Urahara a brief glance as she did so. "But the times given in the report really didn't add up. Shihouin Hirohito's death was apparently *before* the massacre… a massacre which, according to Kuchiki Ginrei's official report, he presided over and took part in. That's all."

“Before the… but…” Ichigo looked nonplussed, but Uryuu’s face paled as he slowly put the pieces of Yoruichi’s story into place.

“Someone falsified a report to make it seem that he’d been killed by the Quincy… to posthumously add weight to the reasoning behind their execution?” He asked softly, and Yoruichi tilted her head one one side, regarding him pensively.

“I’d not raise that idea in Soul Society, but it’s possible.” She agreed. “The Shihouin who inherited the Special Forces next was my father — a very proud man who would not have wanted unpleasant stories to be circulated about the massacre or anything else. The truth of it…? I don’t know. I’ve never bothered to find out. But I know that Shihouin Hirohito was stationed in the real world with two other Captains at the time. Kuchiki Ginrei, who’s meticulous attention to detail was unrivalled by most at the time. And…”

“This guy Shizuki.” Ichigo breathed.

“It’s the only context in which I’ve ever heard that name.” Yoruichi nodded. “But what it means, I have no idea.”

“Maybe *he’s* the one who forged the report.” Uryuu said darkly. “To get into the nobility’s good books.”

“Maybe.” Yoruichi agreed. “Like I said, I never dug into it. I had plenty more on my plate, and it didn’t seem to matter as much to me as it did to my Father to keep the story buried. A dead Shinigami is a dead Shinigami, and that’s that. At least, that’s how I saw it.”

“Well, I’ll see what I can find.” Ichigo sighed heavily. “But it sounds pretty impossible, if people’ve been digging this story into the ground for the past two hundred years.”

“I didn’t think the execution of the Quincy was such a big secret.” Uryuu added, and Urahara shrugged, looking grave.

“It’s not a nice memory for Soul Society to cling to.” He said frankly. “It’s an indication that they failed, after all.”

“Even less likely is Byakuya going to give me anything to look at, then, if that’s the case.” Ichigo said resignedly, ferreting around in the pocket of his trousers for the badge that Ukitake Juushirou had given to him before they had left Soul Society. “Okay. I guess I can assume you’ll take care of my body for me, while I’m gone? I haven’t a clue how much time it’ll take, so someone’d better be taking care of Hollows in my absence, too.”

“Karakura-chou will be just fine.” Urahara told him brightly, and

Ichigo eyed him for a moment, then shrugged.

“Whatever.” He replied, pressing the small, skull-carved badge against the chest of his school shirt. In an instant, a hot rush of energy poured through him, and as his body fell to the floor, he took a deep breath, dropping the badge down onto the table.

“What time did you say the gate was goin’ to open?”

“Ten o’ clock.” Urahara glanced at his watch. “We’ve another twenty minutes yet. Tessei is watching for the signal, so we won’t miss the opportunity.”

“They agreed to this pretty quickly, didn’t they?” Ichigo reflected, and Yoruichi nodded.

“I spoke to Soi Fon last night, and she said she’d raise it with the Sou Taichou, though I didn’t expect it to be that quick an arrangement.” She agreed. “But apparently it met with no opposition. Some of the Captains seem well disposed towards you, Ichigo — though I’d be careful of Zaraki Kenpachi, since apparently he’s still planning to have you for a re-match the moment he sets eyes on you next.”

“Zaraki Kenpachi…” Ichigo stifled a shiver, nodding his head. “It’s okay. He’s so hopeless with geography that I’ll make sure he never finds me. And the others all wanted me to go back? Even though I helped rip up half their place? Forgiving, aren’t they?”

“Or maybe Soi Fon-san scared them into complying.” Uryuu said darkly. “She’s quite scary, after all, when you think about it.”

“Actually, I think it was Kurotsuchi who was the strongest advocate that we look into this.” Yoruichi cast Uryuu a thoughtful look. “I didn’t give many details, but apparently when Soi Fon told them that it was something relating to Soul Society and that it had had some kind of effect on Ishida, he was *very* keen that we bring you back here. Ishida, you in particular.”

“Me…” Uryuu’s brows knitted together, and he clenched his fists, getting to his feet. “That damn sadist! I knew he was something to do with it. I *knew* it! He probably pumped whatever it is into me in the first place!”

“Mayuri?” Urahara looked surprised. “Why would you think that?”

“His sidekick was here, a few days ago.” Uryuu said blackly. “I felt her reiatsu, just briefly. I was sure it was her. Nemu. And that she was checking up on me.”

“Nemu, huh?” Yoruichi waved her tail pensively. “Kisuke, do you know anything about that?”

“Not a thing.” Urahara shook his head. “But even if that is the case, Ishida-san, you’re an active Quincy. You should know what that means better than anyone.”

“I’m not an active Quincy. Not any more.” Uryuu’s voice shook, and Ichigo could hear the bitterness in his tones. “And if anyone should know that, it should be Kurotsuchi and his companions.”

“Maybe that’s why Nemu came here, then.” Urahara suggested. “To check to see whether or not you still needed to be under observation.”

“I’ve *been* under observation!” Uryuu insisted, banging his fist down on the window-sill and narrowly missing Yoruichi’s front paws as he did so. “I just told you. I’m sure she came to spy on me about something. I’m certain of it.”

“That’s paranoid, even for you.” Ichigo said tactlessly. “If that was the case, she’d be doing a pretty shit job of it, wouldn’t she? If you only sensed her about once in the whole time we’ve been back here.”

Uryuu sank down beside the table, frustration on his clever face.

“I can’t explain it.” He whispered. “But I know that’s what she was doing. It’s that Kurotsuchi. I know it. He’s like that. He does this… he thinks we’re all experiments that he can tweak at his disposal.”

“It’s true that Mayuri is very… keen about his scientific investigations.” Urahara rubbed his chin. “But even so, Ishida-san, I don’t see why…”

“He’s done it before. To Quincy. To lots of them.” Uryuu met Urahara’s gaze with a resentful one of his own. “To my grandfather, too. I know. He told me. Hell, he *showed* me. And now there’s me. The last one. And he’s decided to make me the latest in his long line of projects. That’s all. All of this connects to him somehow — I’d swear my life on it!”

“Kisuke…?” Yoruichi cast Urahara a questioning look. “You know Kurotsuchi better than any of us — what do you think?”

“I wouldn’t rule it out.” Urahara admitted. “But… I also wouldn’t go into Soul Society with all guns blazing, trying to get a confession. Understand, Kurosaki-san? Mayuri isn’t the kind of person you can interrogate directly. If his science has compromised Ishida-san’s situation, then there are ways to find that out. But… quite honestly… even if it *is* true that Mayuri experimented on Quincy souls, I can’t see

that this is one of those times. After all, we're dealing with matters that happened before I was a ranked member of the Gotei 13 squads. That being the case, Mayuri was definitely nowhere near the action when all of this was carried out."

"How would you know that?" Uryuu demanded suspiciously, and Urahara shrugged.

"Because he was under lock and key, that's why." He said casually. "He didn't join the Gotei 13 until I was Captain of 12-Bantai, when he became my Third Seat and helped me develop the Research Institute. Nothing that you've told me has suggested that he knew anything about Quincy events two hundred years ago, let alone… Ishida-san?"

For Uryuu's face had turned very white, his whole body trembling with rage as he wheeled on the enigmatic shopkeeper.

"You mean to say… that it was *your* fault that sick bastard was allowed to play God with my ancestors' souls?" He spluttered, and Ichigo stared at him, fascinated by the effect. "You mean that he was safely sealed away, and you *let him out*? Because of you… do you have any idea what he's *done*?"

"Well, there are a lot of people in Soul Society who have axes to grind with me for one thing or another. Letting out Mayuri from his cell is one of the more minor faux pas I may or may not have made during my time in Seireitei." Urahara held up his hands, offering Uryuu a sheepish smile which did nothing to calm the Quincy's ire. "I actually don't consider releasing Mayuri to be a mistake, however. He was a truly brilliant Shinigami, and likely still is. I'm sure that he's made the Research Institute a great thing since I was exiled, after all."

"At the cost of how many innocent souls?" Uryuu banged his hands down on the table, and even Ichigo jumped at the force of the blow. "Dammit, Urahara-san, if I had my bow… if I had my Quincy powers… I wouldn't let that pass. Do you know what he did to my Grandfather? What he gloated about doing to him? Do you have any idea what kind of a sick, twisted individual you let loose on the world?"

"Ishida, shit, calm down already." Now Ichigo decided to take a hand, reaching out to haul his classmate back, but Uryuu was not so easily placated, and he shook his companion off.

"You stay out of it, you damn Shinigami." He snapped, his tone cold and hard. "You wouldn't understand either, because you're on their side."

“For God’s sake, leave the past in the past!” Uryuu looked ready to launch a physical attack on the startled shopkeeper, and Ichigo squared himself, grasping the Quincy firmly by the arms and forcibly pulling him back against the wall. “Whatever happened then happened *then*. Right *now*, we need Urahara-san’s help if we’re going to solve whatever’s biting you, all right? Let it go. He’s done some messed up things an’ we all know that — jus’ add it to the list and move on!”

“And I bet *you’d* be just as keen to forgive and forget if it was the Hollow who killed your mother!” Uryuu shot back, and Ichigo stiffened, staring at him in angry disbelief.

“What the *hell* has that to do with anything?” He demanded. “Shit, Urahara-san didn’t kill your goddamn Grandfather! Nor did Kurotsuchi, from what I can gather. You said it yourself, that it was Hollows an’ all. You’re pissed — okay, I get it. But that ain’t a reason to sink to low blows! Leave my mother out of it, all right? It has nothing to do with this — or you!”

“And my Grandfather has nothing to do with you, either!” Somehow Uryuu found the strength to wrench himself free of Ichigo’s grip, but it took an amount of force, and as he did so, he tripped over the leg of the table, stumbling forward and putting his hand out to steady himself.

“Ishida! Watch out!” Yoruichi’s exclamation pierced through Ichigo’s angry haze in a split-second, as he realised that his Shinigami badge was still lying on the table, exposed and unprotected. He let out a yell, reaching out a desperate arm to tug Uryuu’s falling body out of the way, but his attempt came too late. As the fabric of Uryuu’s shirt brushed uselessly against the tips of his fingers, he could only watch in horror as his classmate’s torso made contact with the badge itself.

What happened next seemed somehow to go in surreal slow motion, as Uryuu’s lean frame was engulfed by a glitter of light, and Ichigo swallowed hard as the haze of his friend’s spiritual body became distinct and separate from the motionless heap of flesh and bone that now lay like a stone across the wood.

“What the…”

Disorientated, Uryuu staggered back, putting a confused hand to his head as though trying to find his bearings. As he did so, Ichigo suddenly realised what was wrong with the picture he was seeing, and his widened as slowly he absorbed his friend’s spiritual form.

There was no chain, and for the briefest of instants, Ichigo worried

that the badge had somehow severed the link between Uryuu and his life for good. Then, the next moment this thought was forgotten as he took in the sweeping, loose black fabric that cloaked the boy's body, and the thick swathe of white cloth that held it tight at the waist.

At that moment he found his voice, and he let out an exclamation of dismay.

"Shit!" He cried. "Ishida… you… you're a friggin'…*Shinigami*!?"

Author's Note:

Disclaimer — all of Yoruichi's family past is entirely in my imagination and not in Kubo-sensei's manga. Sorry about that, Kubo-sensei. :S I needed it to make the plot work out.

Urahara and Mayuri's history… is canon.

Chapter Eleven: Entering the Senkai Gate

Chapter Eleven: Entering the Senkai Gate

So, things were progressing at an adequate rate.

Kurotsuchi sat back in his chair, tapping his claw-like fingers idly on the slick surface of his desk as he ran his gaze greedily over the glut of data he had extracted from the main data-bank earlier that morning. Since the Captain's Meeting, he had been filled with anticipation at the thought of having the young Quincy once more within his grasp. After all, even for him, to find an excuse good enough to slip through the Senkai Gate and into the Real World was a difficult matter. With things as unsettled as they were, he had decided it better to be prudent, sending Nemu instead as he knew that she would be less likely to be missed if anyone came to 12-Bantai's squad offices looking for him. It had been frustrating, he reflected to himself absently, but necessary. And now, it seemed, his patience would have its final reward.

He extended a long, bony finger, typing in a series of characters and watching as a string of complex kanji entries scrolled quickly up the screen before him. It was the culmination of years of theorising and study, and at one point he had thought that there was no longer any purpose in studying either the Quincy or their unyielding, pride-driven ways. His lip curled as he remembered the stolid, unflinching way in which they had all faced his interrogation processes — the obstinacy he had dealt with, time and time again as each of them had spat out their values and refused to give him any more with which to work. That he had broken down several Quincy souls to the barest spiritual elements had still yielded him no joy, and in disgust he had discarded the files, turning his attention instead to other things.

Yet still it had nagged away at the back of his senses. Why was it that these individuals out of so many inferior beings had harnessed such high levels of *reiryoku*? How were these people, with their man-made weapons and their predictably human perspective of life and death able to not only see Hollows, but fight against them and destroy them into nothing more than their component atoms? What was it, after all, that made the Quincy so different from other people that walked the Earth?

Had he only been around at the time of the Quincy massacre, he

reflected pensively. If it had been then, he would have had every opportunity to carry out his studies on as many subjects as Soul Society could provide. But, more was the pity, he had not been. And nor had Urahara established his research facility, so any records that had been kept had been filed away in places that most Shinigami — even Captains — would never obtain access too. In short, any potential information about the elusive human clan had been lost forever in a moment of stupidity.

Kurotsuchi had often regretted deeply that moment of stupidity, even though it had been entirely out of his control. And now, with Quincy becoming a more and more endangered race, he had not hoped to find one in whom he could fully indulge the whole extent of his theorising.

But then he had faced Ishida Uryuu in Soul Society's inner streets, and, in a split second, that had all changed.

Kurotsuchi's yellow eyes narrowed as he remembered the encounter. In terms of fighting, he knew it had been his defeat — yet overall he felt with some triumph that it had been his victory. In the moment the boy had removed his glove and opened himself up to Seireitei's atmosphere, the situation had changed beyond all doubt. And, for a single, exasperatingly brief moment, Kurotsuchi had sensed something about the youngster that he had not sensed before.

That he was capable of great emissions of power — yes, this was surprising enough, but, on balance, not interesting enough to have truly caught the Captain's attention. Yet as fragments of Soul Society's entire structure had begun to pour into the Quincy's final arrows, Kurotsuchi had seen a possibility he had not seen before.

Soul Society had often negotiated with the Quincy in the past, after all. But — at least not during his own time in charge, he reflected — no *living* Quincy had ever set foot inside Soul Society.

That is, until now.

Kurotsuchi's lips twitched into a cool, calculating grin as he dragged up a particular record, flashing it onto the screen and skimming his gaze over the contents.

"And now it's a whole new game." He murmured to himself.

"Did you ask me something, Mayuri-sama?"

Nemu's voice at his right hand almost made him jerk out of his skin and he swung around, casting his fist in her direction and shoving her away from him as he glared at her for so easily catching him off-

guard.

“Don’t speak to me when I’m thinking, girl! I’m hard at work here — why are you idling? Am I not giving you enough to do?”

“I have a report to make, Mayuri-sama. On the Quincy, Ishida Uryuu.” Nemu staggered backwards, only just steadying herself as she raised her solemn gaze to her Captain’s irritated one, and Kurotsuchi tut-tutted under his breath.

“Then why didn’t you say so sooner?” He demanded. “Well? Tell me what you found. Have there been further changes in his reiatsu? Report, Nemu, and be quick about it! We have very little time, after all, before our subject will be entirely within our sights!”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu bowed her head in acquiescence. “However, the boy’s reiatsu has acted much the same as it has since you last heard my report. It seems that being in the Real World has hampered any progress. It continues to tremor during his dreams — but there have been no more dramatic episodes like the one the other day.”

“Well, then the sooner he is brought back here the better.” Kurotsuchi’s eyes glittered. “Well? Tell me that isn’t all, you wretched girl!”

“No, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu shook her head, reaching into the sash of her kimono and producing a folded up sheet of paper, which she held out to him.

Kurotsuchi snatched it greedily from her hands, devouring the contents with an eager gaze.

“At last, a reading!” He murmured. “And this is accurate? Your trip to the Real World was brief, after all — you are quite certain that all the correct conditions were observed?”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama. I have processed all of them in minute detail and verified them several times, as per your orders.”

“Then this can be considered a step forward.” Delight glittered in Kurotsuchi’s gaze. “Well, Nemu, we are on the verge of something I thought I’d never be able to prove. Do you realise how important a discovery this is?”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama. I understand.”

“No, of course you don’t — because you’re just a useless halfwit I made to sate my boredom.” Kurotsuchi snapped back at her cruelly. “Still, even so… even so…”

He gripped the paper more tightly in his clawed fingers.

“This is what I hoped for.” He whispered. “To encounter a living Quincy and to discover as much about them as I could. I have processed the readings of that boy’s fighting reiatsu many, many times. And that last time… those last attacks… there was a change. A drastic change… something that should not have been there was there. Now, these readings prove that I was right all along.”

He cast Nemu an impatient glance.

“Return to your post and continue to monitor Ishida Uryuu’s progress.” He instructed her. “The moment anything more positive occurs, I must know about it.”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu bowed her head once more, retreating from the room as silently as she had come.

As the door closed softly behind her, Kurotsuchi dropped the printout down on the desk, reading over it one more time.

“There may not have been a Research Institute two hundred years ago.” He murmured, reaching across to type the long and complex string of figures and characters into the database he had loaded up on the screen before him. “But there’s always been a detailed and comprehensive record of Shinigami *zanpakutou* archived in Central 46’s main computer system. And since Central 46 is currently out of action, it seems prudent for me to acquire as much information from it as possible, in case any meddling in the mechanics render the files unreadable. For future generations of scientists, these files are, after all, irreplaceable.”

His eyes narrowed to near slits as a sequence of records flashed up onto the screen, nodding absently to himself as he scrolled down the references one by one. They were all inter-linked, he reflected — and the specific nature of the result only gave him further reassurance that his hypothesising so far had been in the right direction.

He pressed another sequence of buttons, smiling and tapping the crumpled, folded sheet of paper in triumph as a particular record loaded up in front of his gaze.

“*Got* you.” He murmured. “I knew there’d be a match. And what a match… what a match indeed. It almost might explain… why that little runt was almost able to kill me.”

His mind flitted back to the confrontation once more, as he visualised with painstaking accuracy the look on the boy’s face as he had drawn back his bow’s string before launching the glittering,

particle-gorged projectile across Seireitei's pure, spirit-saturated atmosphere. It had been overwhelmingly, *stupidly* strong — yet even so it had not been with all the force and power that he had come to expect from a Quincy weapon. It had been something else — something distinctive and yet unfamiliar — something which had inspired Kurotsuchi Mayuri to make Ishida Uryuu a prime target for his future experimentation.

And now he had discovered, at the very least, *what* energy had fired that bow into the Seireitei ether.

His grin widened.

"One soul, one *zanpakutou* — unique from all others in their make-up and spiritual design." He muttered, not caring that he was talking to himself and not even the attentive Nemu was nearby to acknowledge his brilliance. "Each recorded in Soul Society's deepest, darkest archives — each one registered and wielded in Soul Society's name. No two Shinigami ever wield the same sword… however…"

He sat back, glancing at his own sheathed *zanpakutou* as he absorbed the full magnitude of his discovery.

When Uryuu had fired his bow, the spirit particles that had powered it had not held the taint of Quincy spiritualism, but instead the Kidou-driven thrust of a Shinigami blade. And now, through his pedantic, minutely detailed research, Kurotsuchi had found a match.

"Two hundred years, huh." He said aloud, getting to his feet and moving towards the door of the chamber. "Well, well. The tale grows ever more intriguing. The sooner the boy gets here, the better."

He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

"…And I'll be certain to have a warm welcome waiting for him when he does."

For a moment, silence filled the room, as everyone stared at Uryuu with a mixture of fascination and disbelief. Then, with a little sigh, Yoruichi dropped down from her perch, padding across the floor towards him with what could only be described as a look of resignation on her feline features.

Had Uryuu not been preoccupied with his sudden shift in spiritual status, he would probably have found the cat's expression amusing. But at that moment his mind was otherwise engaged, as he gazed down at his body in dismay, touching the fabric of the *hakama* as if unable to fully comprehend what he was seeing. His face drained of

all colour, his earlier anger forgotten in his alarm at this sudden, unexpected transformation, and he swallowed hard, unable to form words as he struggled to come to terms with it.

At length, Urahara spoke.

“Well, this is interesting.” He said casually. “I don’t suppose we’d anticipated this particular turn of events — it seems that the situation is a little more progressed than any of us thought.”

“What the hell do you mean, progressed?” Uryuu demanded, panic flickering through is indigo eyes. “You *expected* this to happen? And you didn’t *tell* me?”

“Actually, I didn’t.” Urahara admitted, rubbing his stubbled chin ruefully as he shook his head. “I’m sorry, Ishida-san. I didn’t mean to give you that impression. All I meant was that… well… in order for your body to exist in that form, it means…”

“That right now your soul is more Shinigami than Quincy.” Yoruichi finished neatly.

Uryuu’s face blanched even further, and he held up his hands, shaking his head firmly.

“I. Am. *Not.* A. Shinigami.” He said, emphasising each word as though by doing so he could better get his point across. “This is not normal. This is nowhere *near* normal. I should be chained… right? I should be walking around in a human body doing ordinary things and something like this… I should be *chained*, dammit!”

“If you keep bleatin’ on like a lunatic, someone *will* chain you, an’ lock away the key.” Ichigo told him frankly, and Uryuu glowered at him darkly.

“It isn’t funny.” He snapped. “You know what I mean! I shouldn’t be able to exist outside of my corporeal state!”

“Well, ‘shouldn’t’ really isn’t coming into it, because you are.” Ichigo observed tactlessly. ‘I don’t know why you’re making such a fuss. Sure, it’s weird, but you know, black death robes sort of suit you. Besides, we already thought you had a Shinigami in your belfry, right? This confirms it. An’ if you’re like *that*,’ He gestured, “That means you can come to Soul Society with me tonight. Right? They can prod an’ poke you an’ find a way to fix you. Problem solved, an’ time saved all round.”

“You really don’t get it, do you?” Uryuu put his hands on his hips, clearly in no mood to be consoled. “*You* pop out of your body all the

time, so it's not even strange any more. Some of us don't like discarding our skin like it's banana peel and diving into combat situations. All right? It's like taking your clothes off in public."

He shivered.

"Except I took off *everything.* And now I'm like this."

He scooped up Ichigo's badge, tossing it at him bad-temperedly.

"Thanks to you leaving this lying around." He added pointedly. "Thanks a bunch, Kurosaki. Thanks a whole bunch."

"Well, what's done is done." Yoruichi observed with a sigh. "Ishida, stop acting like someone killed you. It's unexpected, but Ichigo is right. It does make things easier in one way. And besides, you're not cut off from your body. You can still return to it — it's not like the link is severed. It's just… a little different at the moment. That's all."

"Depending, of course, on how strong the Shinigami in Ishida-san's soul currently is." Urahara said casually, and Uryuu stared at him, apprehension in his indigo gaze.

"What do you mean by *that*?" He exclaimed, and Urahara offered him a benign grin.

"Just that you're not a Shinigami like Kurosaki-san is." He said pleasantly. "It's there in your reiatsu — I sense it there more than I did before your little accident just now. But it's not all-encompassing. You're an interesting muddle of things at the moment, Ishida-san. It's an unprecedented transition and therefore there are a lot of things unknown. I'd take care of yourself and not push yourself too hard for the time being. We really *don't* know, after all, exactly what's happening to you. And if you're outside of your body… there's always risk."

"Right. That's it. That's it, I'm going back into it." Uryuu said frankly, taking a pace or two towards the still form that still lay spread-eagled across the table. "Aside from the fact that it looks really ugly and ungainly, spread out like someone dropped me from an aeroplane and forgot my parachute, it's too weird seeing myself lying there. And another thing, if there's risk associated with me being like this… I want to go back. I'm not designed to be this way — I'm not into taking the kind of gambles Kurosaki takes with his body!"

"Now you're out, it's better you stay out." Yoruichi shook her head, trotting across to bar the way between the reluctant Shinigami and his human form. "Stop whining like a baby, Ishida. If you're old enough to spout Quincy rhetoric and fire a bow at Shinigami Captains, you're

old enough to deal with this. Pipe down a moment and get a hold of yourself, will you? You're going to Soul Society with Ichigo this evening. It's decided. And you'll go like that."

"Don't I get a say in this?" Uryuu demanded, and Yoruichi flexed her claws pensively.

"No, because time is of the essence." She responded, turning to glance at Ichigo at this juncture. "You hear that, Ichigo? As quickly as you can find a solution, find it. Understood? Kisuke's right. None of us know how long Ishida's body can stand this kind of transformation. It depends on the cause and the nature of it — and we don't want his life put at risk. Okay?"

"Okay. I get it." Ichigo agreed gruffly, nodding his head. "Don't worry, Yoruichi-san. I won't let him get into any trouble while we're there."

"I like that!" Uryuu's eyes widened with disbelief and indignation behind his glasses. "Who was it last time who tore up half of Seireitei! I'll have you know it wasn't me!"

"Shit, chill out." Ichigo held up his hands. "You know what I mean. You're wound up as hell, and we ain't going there to slash up Kurotsuchi or anythin' like that. Okay? Even if you do hate him. Besides,"

He frowned, chewing on his lip, and Uryuu's brows knitted together at the sudden hesitation.

"Besides?" He demanded, and Ichigo spread his hands.

"You ain't got a *zanpakutou*." He said simply. "So it'd be hard for you t'fight, in any case."

"Not got a…" Uryuu glanced down at his white-sashed waist, realising with a jolt that Ichigo was right. He shrugged his shoulders bad-temperedly.

"Well, it's hardly surprising." He snapped. "I'm a Quincy. I'm not a Shinigami. Why the hell would I have a *zanpakutou*? This is weird enough without adding that to the equation."

"Tenchou, the gate is ready."

At that moment Tessai eased his considerable frame into the chamber, pausing for a moment to stare stupified at Uryuu and then his discarded body. His bushy eyebrows shot up, and he glanced at Urahara quizzically.

“Shall I make preparations to store two human bodies, rather than one?” He asked evenly, and Urahara nodded his head, getting to his feet and reaching for the familar polished cane that housed his own beloved sword.

“Yes… if you could.” He agreed amiably. “As you can see we had an unexpected turn of events — but since it seems to be to our advantage, I think it’s best we follow through. The gate is ready, you said? Good. Then we shouldn’t hesitate here any longer.”

He gestured to the two teenagers.

“It’s time, you two. Let’s go.”

“Right.” Ichigo nodded his head, grabbing Uryuu’s arm and pulling him towards the trapdoor that led to the impossibly huge Shouten cellar before he could react or protest further about not wanting to go.

“I’ll continue the preparations to open a doorway between this world and that, while you’re gone.” Urahara said pleasantly, as they clambered down the ladder into the chamber below. “It will take a little longer, but I’ll still see what I can do about sending Inoue-san and perhaps Sado-san across to give you some help. After all, as Yoruichi-san said — we want to resolve this as swiftly as possible for your safety’s sake, Ishida-san.”

“That really makes me feel a whole lot better.” Uryuu muttered, and Ichigo gave him a little shove, casting him an irritated glance.

“Yeesh, if you’re going to whine the whole time, it’s going to be one hell of a drag trip.” He said derisively.

As they reached the glittering aura of the opening Senkai Gate, he turned to cast the shopkeeper a wry grin.

“It’ll be all right. You can count on me.” He said briskly. “Tell Inoue and Chad not to worry too much about Ishida, either. Or about me. We’ll manage… hell, we might be back again before you’ve had a chance to open the gate for them to come across. Noone in Soul Society’s out for our blood now — and when they see Ishida like this, they’ll realise we’re not foolin’ around an’ help, I’m sure.”

“I’m glad you’re so optimistic.” Uryuu sighed, glancing at his hands. “I still think this has something to do with that bastard Kurotsuchi.”

“If it does, then we’ll find out.” Ichigo said frankly, as the black-velvet wings of a Hell Butterfly flitted purposefully around his head. “Either way, that’s our ride — so we’re going. Come on — sooner we get there, sooner we get back!”

And with that he grabbed Uryuu once more by the arm, hauling him into the darkness beyond.

“Do you think they’ll be all right?”

Once alone, Urahara cast his feline companion a quizzical look, even as the gate shimmered and closed before them. “Kurosaki-san is such a hot-headed youngster, after all… do you think they’ll really be able to solve it on their own?”

“It doesn’t hurt to hope, but I doubt it.” Yoruichi stretched out her paws as she considered the question. “This isn’t a simple matter, after all, Kisuke.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Particularly not if Kurotsuchi *is* involved.”

“Yes… true.” Urahara rubbed his chin absently. “Well, I’ll begin work on setting up the gate for Inoue-san and Sado-san to join them, shall I? If that’s the case, it seems they might need some assistance and the less time I waste, the better.”

“Yes.” Yoruichi agreed. “While we don’t know what triggered Ishida’s sudden change, we do know that it’s not normal for him to be this way, or what strain its putting on his already damaged *reiryoku*. If he’s ever going to have any chance of regaining a shred of Quincy power then we have to get to the bottom of this before it’s too late.”

Author’s note:

I guess this is what you might call a ‘moving on’ chapter. More intrigue to come in the next chapter, more action to come in the one after that. Stay tuned. Plenty of Ishida angsting too.

*As regards the long awaited zanpakutou, too — look out for the first *teensy* clue regarding it in the next installment…*

God, it’s cold in the UK today. My fingers are shivering and I’m inside my room with the heating on :S Extra blankies please!

Meantime if anyone’s interested I posted a Kira and Momo random oneshot a few days ago. I said this would be my only Bleach fic (since as a rule I never write anything in which the storyline is ongoing because of continuity) but I guess we’ll see. I never write oneshots either, so I seem to be breaking all my own rules of late…

Finally, I must apologise for the occasional misspelling of Tessai’s name. This is because, in the Tenchi Muyou universe (for which I wrote a lot of

stuff over an eighteen month period) there is a nasty piece of work character called Tessei and it's easy to get the two muddled in my mind. Not the characters, I hasten to add — but the names are a heck of a lot alike. So if you see Tessei, please just ignore it and read it as Tessai, please? I have tried to edit the mistakes out, but I'm sure I've missed a few here and there since I don't have anyone else to proof my work for me and when you write it yourself, you tend not to notice certain things that seem obvious…

Arigatou :)

Chapter Twelve: The Unknown Key

Chapter Twelve: The Unknown Key

"Ichigo!…*Ishida?!*"

As Ichigo and his companion stepped through the Senkai Gate and onto Soul Society soil, they were greeted by a yell, and Ichigo turned, meeting the incredulous gaze of his former Hollow-hunting partner with a rueful grin of his own.

"Yo, Rukia." He said casually, raising his hand in a greeting. "You came to meet us?"

"Yes." Rukia nodded, her gaze fixed on Uryuu's black-clad form. "But I didn't expect… what the hell happened? Ishida, why are you wearing a *hakama*… what's gone on in the Real World since I came back here?"

"If you can answer that question, Kuchiki-san, I'll be in your debt forever." Uryuu said heavily. "It's not by choice, I assure you."

"But are you… is he… you came through the Senkai Gate, so that means…" Rukia trailed off, peering at her bespectacled companion a second time. "Dammit, you really are… a Shinigami?"

"Like I said, it's not by choice." Uryuu pushed his glasses back on his nose, his blue eyes clouded. "Nor is my being here, either."

"Nii-sama told me *you* were coming." Rukia glanced at Ichigo. "But we thought you were coming alone. Still.."

"This was an unexpected development." Ichigo smiled wryly. "So Urahara-san said it might as well be better for us both to come. Ishida was going to come here, anyhow, once the gate was ready. But since it was open, and since he seems to be all Shinigami right at this second… it was decided he'd come with me. Is it a problem? Because… er… he's a mite crabby and the sooner we fix him, the better."

"*You'd* be a mite crabby if you were forced to take a trip without your body, and you didn't know if you'd even ever see it again." Uryuu objected acidly. "Besides, had you stopped to consider the fact that I am a Quincy? This is entirely unnatural — of course I'm crabby!"

“How could I forget? You’ve only raised it about ten times in the last hour.” Ichigo rolled his eyes, turning his attention back to the stupefied Rukia.

“Well? If Byakuya knows you’re here, that means he’s not too pissed about me comin’ back, right? Which is good, because I might need to ask a favour of him — is he in a good mood?”

“I don’t suppose he’s in a bad one, although he’s not overly thrilled that Yamamoto Sou Taichou agreed to open the gate for you.” Rukia admitted. “Why? What do you think he can do? If Ishida’s a Shinigami now, that’s one thing — but how do you expect Nii-sama to solve it?”

“It’s not that.” Ichigo shook his head. “It’s a bit more complicated. Urahara-san and Yoruichi-san seemed to think we might find clues in the archives that the Kuchiki-ke keep… about something that happened a coupl’a centuries back.”

“Now you’ve totally lost me.” Rukia looked mystified, and Uryuu rubbed his temples.

“Whatever’s happening to me has some connection to the massacre of the Quincy two hundred years ago.” He said tiredly. “What, exactly, we don’t know but… it’s something to do with a guy called Shizuki. I’m pretty sure of it. Apparently he was someone your Grandfather knew, Kuchiki-san. Someone he worked with a long time ago.”

“What are you saying?” Rukia’s eyes widened. “That you’ve been possessed… by a Shinigami’s *ghost*?!”

“That’s the theory we’re workin’ on, though how and why is still beyond us.” Ichigo scratched his head ruefully. “So? What happens now? Where are you takin’ us, Rukia?”

“I’ll need to speak to Nii-sama for you, about the archives.” Rukia decided, recovering her wits. “But for the time being, probably, it’s better to head to 6-Bantai’s squad offices. Renji’s there — Nii-sama has him working late on some paperwork or other, and earlier this afternoon he also charged Renji with helping ‘keep you out of trouble’, or some such thing. So for the time being, that seems to be the best bet.”

“6-Bantai? Not *13*-Bantai?” Ichigo’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t get kicked outta your squad, did you? Ukitake-san didn’t seem like that kind of a tight-ass, but…”

“No, nothing like that.” Rukia shook her head. “But until my *reiryoku* returns and I can use my *zanpakutou* again, I’m not exactly fit for purpose. Nii-sama and Ukitake-taichou have spoken, I know, and I

will be returning to my squad when I'm healed — but right now I'm staying at the Kuchiki estate most of the time."

She pulled a face.

"In contrast to that, stopping a night at 6-Bantai's offices would be a welcome change."

"You really don't like Byakuya's pad, do you?" Ichigo reflected, as they walked through the moonlit streets towards the cul-de-sac that housed 6-Bantai's working chambers. Rukia snorted, shaking her head.

"I wasn't brought up that way." She admitted. "Nii-sama's doing what he can to help me, and I know that — but I'm happier when I'm with my squad and being treated like a normal person, not like some member of a family I'm only connected to by association. Still, since everything happened, Nii-sama seems to be… watching out for me a lot more than I realised he was before. And I don't want to upset him by rejecting his support — so in the end it's been easier to just go along with it."

"You an' him are all buddy buddy now, then?" Ichigo pursed his lips. "That's good. If that's the case, you can probably sweet-talk him on our behalf."

"I'll try, in the morning." Rukia agreed. "For the time being, though, it's probably better we don't bother him."

"Byakuya-san isn't in his office, then?" Uryuu asked, and Rukia shook her head.

"He already headed back to the estate to settle some family business." She responded. "He left Renji in charge here. Actually, he's been doing that a lot, recently. Renji seems to think it's some kind of covert punishmet for insubordination — but I actually think Nii-sama's just trusting him to do his job as Vice Captain."

"I can see how, with a guy like Byakuya, it'd be hard to tell the difference." Ichigo said ruefully, and despite herself, Rukia laughed.

"I'm glad you're back here." She admitted. "I've been bored out of my mind — at least now I have something to do."

At that moment they reached the big, white-washed panel door, painted with the diamond and the four slashing strokes of the character for 'six', and as a couple of junior officers darted out of the shadows, blades drawn, she paused, raising her hands in mock-surrender.

"We're here to see Abarai-fukutaichou." She said clearly. "He's

expecting us."

"Kuchiki-san!" One of the youngsters lowered his sword at this, offering her a rueful smile. "Come on through. I'm sorry — if we'd realised it was you sooner…"

"It's all right. You're doing your job." Rukia assured them. "Renji's still in his office, is he?"

"Yes." The youngster nodded. "But he was just finishing off the Captain's assignment. Come with me — I'll take you there."

He cast her two companions an interested look, but he did not ask any questions, and as the doorway to 6-Bantai's quarters slid back, Ichigo cast Uryuu a glance.

"Hey, you okay? You're damn quiet, considering the moaning you were doing on the other side."

"I'm fine, so leave me alone." Came the abrupt response. "Or at least, as fine as anyone can be when they're forced out of their body and into the world of the dead."

"Fine, then I won't ask you." Ichigo clicked his tongue impatiently against his teeth. "Though sometimes you really are a pain in the ass."

"I thought I heard noise."

The door of the Vice Captain's office swung back at this juncture, effectively preventing Uryuu from finding a cutting response, and Renji stepped out into the hallway, stopping as his gaze flitted from Ichigo to Uryuu and then back to Ichigo again. His hands were blacked with ink, as though he had spent much of the afternoon writing, and somehow this thought struck Ichigo as funny.

"You know, I didn't know you could write as well as wave a sword with those hands." He said teasingly, and Renji frowned, cast him a dark glance.

"Most people say hello, first thing they arrive." He said gruffly. "You want to do 6-Bantai's paperwork? Be my guest."

He pursed his lips.

"More to the point, what's Ishida doing here? I thought it was just you, Ichigo — don't tell me you're scared of comin' through the Senkai Gate alone, so you've brought a friend?"

"Don't be stupid." Now it was Ichigo's turn to be annoyed. "Isn't it obvious why he's here? He's messed up — and we've come here to fix it."

“Apparently Ishida’s been possessed by a Shinigami’s ghost.” Rukia added, and Renji snorted, reaching out a black-stained finger to poke Uryuu’s arm.

“Hey!” Uryuu protested, but Renji took no notice, shooting Ichigo a disbelieving glance.

“Possessed by a Shinigami’s *ghost*? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Just what Rukia said.” Ichigo responded. “Did you get ink in your ears or something? Ishida’s got a Shinigami flitting around his brain… and we need to get him out.”

“You realise how crazy that sounds?” Renji demanded. “Shinigami are Death Gods, you moron. They send souls from one place to another. They’re already dead in your world. Why the hell would they come back and haunt one of your lot? It’s a crackbrained theory that doesn’t make any sense. Even for you that’s pushing the boat out, dont’cha think?”

“That’s the best we have right now, so deal with it.” Ichigo said frankly. “We don’t know how it’s possible either. But Ishida’s a Shinigami an’ that shouldn’t be possible, so all bets are off right now.”

“No kidding.” Renji poked Uryuu again, and Uryuu bristled, pulling back.

“I’m not a freak show, you know!” He objected. “That hurts!”

“Sorry.” Renji looked sheepish. “It’s just… shit, I thought it was weird enough that Ichigo kicked outta his body an’ crossed the divide but… is it catching now, or something? Are all of Karakura takin’ courses in bein’ Shinigami?”

“My *reiryoku* has never had anything to do with Kurosaki.” Uryuu said stiffly, pushing his glasses pointedly back on his nose as if to emphasise his point. “Even if he is as leaky as a broken nuclear reactor and even if he has spread his radiation to other people in his surroundings, I’m not one of them. I’m a Quincy. I was born with *reiryoku*. And…”

“And you’re shutting your mouth, else Zangetsu’s shutting it for you.” Ichigo cut across him. “I swear, Ishida, you’re doing my head in right now. You had *reiryoku*, but you lost it fightin’ here the last time. Let’s get that straight to begin with, all right, because it seems t’be the cause of the problem. An’ since then you’ve been blackin’ out and who knows what.”

“Maybe Renji’s right.” Rukia murmured. “Maybe, if Ishida lost his powers, he’s become susceptible to your leaky *reiryoku* just like Inoue and Sado.”

“Well, that’s one thing we’re here to find out.” Ichigo said frankly, as Uryuu shot him a particularly venomous glare. “But for the time being, it’s late an’ we’re goin’ to get nowhere tonight. Where are we cool to drop an’ sleep? The earlier we’re up in the morning, the sooner we can badger Byakuya for help.”

“If you want the Taichou’s help, I’d stop callin’ him by his first name.” Renji advised. “He’s a bit touchy about it — you won’t get anywhere if you tackle him like that.”

“Renji’s right.” Rukia nodded. “You’re going to have to play it his way if you want his help. I’ll do what I can — but Nii-sama’s been raised as a noble son, and he expects to be treated as one.”

“I told you that.” Uryuu added. “He’s not your basketball buddy.”

“As for where you can stop, there’s a spare room at the back of the offices which’ll do you.” Renji added. “It ain’t big, but then we thought we were only takin’ one stray, so you’ll have t’make do.”

“It’ll be fine.” Ichigo assured him. “We slept in worse when we were here before, after all.”

“Then follow me.” Renji said simply, gesturing towards the end of the long corridor.

“Did you say that Ishida’d been blacking out?” As they walked, Rukia cast the visitors a questioning look, and Ichigo nodded his head.

“That, an’ firing Kidou off at me.” He said casually, and Renji paused, turning to stare at the discomfitted Uryuu in surprise.

“I didn’t know Quincy could do Kidou.” He observed, and Uryuu shook his head.

“I can’t.” He said frankly. “At least, I don’t remember doing it, and couldn’t do it again if you paid me. I only know it happened because Kurosaki and Inoue-san both saw me do it.”

“So that’s why you think he’s been possessed by a Shinigami.” Renji tut-tutted under his breath. “I still don’t see how the hell that’d be possible, though. Look, I did years of trainin’ before I got to bein’ a squad Shinigami, an’ whatever else… we had to study a lot of shit an’ I don’t remember ever learnin’ anything about Shinigami comin’ back as ghosts. It jus’ doesn’t work that way.”

“But Shinigami can die, right?” Ichigo pressed, and Rukia nodded, a clouded look entering her gaze.

“Yes.” She agreed slowly. “But… technically speaking, when they do die… their soul becomes a part of Soul Society until it’s ready to be reborn again in the Real World. It’s a quite different situation… if I had a pen and paper, I’d draw it for you and you could see.”

“Not if it was *your* drawing.” Ichigo muttered, and Rukia glared at him.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” Ichigo shook his head. “For now, I get the explanation. But otherwise, we don’t know what’s goin’ on. Like he keeps bleatin’ on — Ishida’s a Quincy. He ain’t a Shinigami. An’ it’s different.”

“No kidding.” Uryuu said blackly, touching the *hakama* with dislike. “I already feel dirty, wearing this thing.”

At that moment they reached the chamber Renji had mentioned, and he pushed back the door, ushering them inside. It was, as he had said, a small chamber, but there was still room for two futons to be unrolled without them overlapping, and Ichigo cast him a grin.

“This’ll do.” He said frankly. “Thanks, Renji. Guess we owe you one.”

“Well, putting up with you here is Taichou’s orders.” Renji offered him a rueful grin. “An’ I’m doin’ my best to toe the line where they’re concerned — at least for the time being.”

“I really don’t think he’s still cross with you, Renji.” Rukia objected, and Renji shook his head.

“No. Maybe not. Not about that, anyhow.” He said cryptically, sending her a pensive glance. “Besides, it’s cool. I’m equal to whatever he throws at me — this is a chance t’prove that.”

Uryuu sank down onto the floor with a sigh.

“And tomorrow we can ask Byakuya-san about access to the archives?” He asked hopefully. Rukia nodded.

“I s’pect so.” She agreed. ‘In the meantime, fill us in on what’s already happened. We can see that Ishida’s not himself,’ As Ichigo raised an eyebrow, “And I know you said he fired Kidou… but…”

“Ishida?” Ichigo’s gaze flitted to his companion, who shrugged helplessly.

“I don’t understand either. I can probably tell them less than you can, seeing as I don’t remember these random moments of insanity I apparently had.” He retorted. “In fact, if it wasn’t for the fact Inoue-san saw the Kidou too, I’d be inclined not to believe that, either. As it is…”

“Hey!” Ichigo objected. “Are you saying you trust Inoue’s judgement over mine?”

“Yes.” Uryuu said frankly, and Renji smirked.

“I can see that.” He said teasingly. “But you know, even if you did fire Kidou at him — an’ I can understand why you’d want to — you ain’t a proper Shinigami, are you? I mean, you ain’t got a sword. An’ even when he had Rukia’s powers, Ichigo had a sword.”

“That’s true.” Rukia nodded. “Even though it was a deformed version of Sode no Shirayuki… it was still a sword. And now he has Zangetsu. But you don’t have one, Ishida.”

“Well, that’s probably because Quincy fight with bows and arrows, and it doesn’t translate.” Uryuu shrugged his shoulders. “Look, I know you’re just trying to help. But I’m as confused as the rest of you, and besides that, my head is aching. I’m not used to slipping in and out of my skin like some people, and it takes a bit of getting used to.”

“Gigais can be damn uncomfortable.” Renji agreed pensively, and Uryuu snorted, shaking his head.

“This isn’t a gigai.” He snapped. “It’s my proper body, where I belong! Right now I should be at home, in bed, asleep — *inside my own skin*!”

“But if you were, you might wind up having another strange dream.” Ichigo pointed out, and Uryuu sighed, removing his glasses and setting them down on the wood floor at his side.

“Yes, true.” He conceded. “But there’s nothing to say I won’t have one here, either. Right now, to be honest, I’m too tired to care either way.”

“I guess that’s our cue to leave.” Renji got to his feet. “C’mon, Rukia. Let’s let ‘em sleep. We’ll get more sense out of them in the mornin’ — or if we can’t, we’ll get Taichou to poke ’em a coupl’a times with Senbonzakura. Mood he’s been in lately, he’ll like that.”

“Which means Byakuya’s *not* in a good mood…?” Ichigo looked apprehensive, and Renji spread his hands.

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell.” He admitted. “But he’s been a bit…

edgy lately, I guess you'd say. So you'd do best t'stay out of his way as much as you can, and let Rukia do the bulk of the talkin' if you want t'get anywhere."

He reached over to grab Rukia's arm.

"An' I'm meant t'make sure you don't overstretch yourself, too, so come on." He added. "I don't need another pile of filin' work dumped on me tomorrow if you get worn out on my watch."

"I'm fine." Rukia wrenched her arm away, eying him in irritation. "And it's not like you to fuss, either. What the hell's he said to you?"

"You sound like a nagging couple, when you talk like that." Uryuu observed absently, and Renji coloured, staring at the Quincy in dismay.

"What the hell?" He demanded. "I've got my orders, an' Rukia doesn't listen when people tell her what to do! Just because you're feelin' shit at the moment, don't start targetin' people around you!"

"Chill out, Renji." Rukia instructed. "*I* know, even if he doesn't. And I'm coming, in any case."

She turned, casting the two visitors a smile.

"Sweet dreams." She added.

"Chance'd be a fine thing." Uryuu muttered.

"Goodnight, Rukia. Renji. Thanks for the roof over our heads." Ichigo stretched out on the floor. "Tomorrow, the proper investigating begins!"

There was a certain buzz in the air that evening.

Kira walked slowly across the training grounds belonging to 3-Bantai, deep in thought as he gazed up at the half-obscured moon that glittered in the blackened sky. It's silverish aura brought a faint, bittersweet smile to his face, and for a moment he lost himself in his reflections, remembering the first time he had come to join the squad.

At the time, it had seemed like a bold new adventure — a promotion and an honour that his hard work had been building up to. And for a long time, it had stayed that way. Ichimaru had been an odd kind of Captain at times, true enough — and Kira acknowledged to himself that often he hadn't known precisely what thoughts were running through his leader's head at any given moment. But even so,

it had been easy to be his Vice Captain. Ichimaru had not been cruel, even though he had often been inscrutible. And Kira had felt as though his position was both stable and appreciated — a position in which his long-dead parents would have found pride.

He leant up against one of the wall's supportive pillars, letting out his breath in a rush.

It was ironic, then, that at the moment when the squad had been effectively left in his hands, he felt more incapable than he ever had before of taking the lead.

Had Ichimaru's betrayal really affected him so badly as that? He wasn't sure. Was he really such a pathetic puppet of a man that he had only followed orders to the point where he could no longer think for himself? Or was it something else, stabbing away inside of him, that had prompted this current flood of loathing and self-doubt?

His gaze flitted across to where he could just make out the shadowed outline of the 4-Bantai Infirmary, the roof glinting slightly in the hazy moonlight. Inside, he knew, Hinamori Momo still slept, having not regained consciousness since the attack on her life.

Kira closed his eyes, pushing the thought away.

I have to stop dwelling on the past. Hinamori-kun is alive, and she will recover… I have faith in Unohana-taichou and her ministrations. When she recovers, I can talk to her. When she recovers… maybe she'll forgive me. And understand, because after all, she was betrayed as well.

"Kira-fukutaichou!"

A voice from the barracks behind him jerked him out of his thoughts and he turned, making out the slim form of one of the lesser seated members of the squad hurrying towards him in the darkness. He frowned, inwardly berating himself for having let his guard down even a little bit in front of his men. Yamamoto Sou Taichou's words echoed in his ears once more and he gathered his wits, waiting for the subordinate officer to reach him.

"Why are you shouting at the top of your voice at this time of night?" He chided gently, as the young Shinigami reached him. "We're close enough to 4-Bantai to disturb those still in need of convalescence, you know."

"Sorry, sir." The youngster's face flooded red. "It's just… there's a message, that's all. And we couldn't find you."

"Then I'm probably the one who's sorry." Despite himself, a faint,

rueful smile touched Kira's thin features. "All right. Then give me the message, and I'll attend to it at once — if I can."

"Yes, sir." The junior nodded his head. "It's just… Hitsugaya-taichou is here. And he wants to see you. That's all."

"Hitsugaya… taichou?" Kira's features underwent a transformation and he sped up his pace, casting the junior an anxious glance. "And I've kept him waiting? How long has he been here — how long have you been looking for me?"

"Only a little while, sir." The junior looked startled at the sudden change in his companion's composure. "I thought I saw you come out this way, so I decided to come see if you were here. I thought you might be planning something for our morning training — that is, providing that we're… still sticking to… Ichimaru-taichou's schedules."

He bit his lip, eying his Vice Captain apprehensively.

"I mean, we've not done since… and well… since the Special Forces will have finished their investigation into the Captain's office soon,…I wasn't sure…"

Kira's eyes narrowed, inwardly berating himself a second time for not having seen the uncertainty brewing among the younger members of the squad. Again, the Sou Taichou had been right, he told himself bitterly. 3-Bantai might not have a Captain, but they did at least have a Vice Captain. And even if he was ill suited for the post, it was up to him to hold the fort until things settled down.

"As soon as we get the go-ahead from the Investigation team to begin ordinary manoeuvres, we will." He said frankly. "I've no desire to keep living in this limbo either, to be honest with you. It puts us all at a loss, and that's not the way 3-Bantai should be run."

The youngster sighed, relief in his gaze.

"I'm glad." He admitted. "Since Ichimaru-taichou went, it's been like… everyone looks at us as though we were part of it. And I suppose… I don't want them to think that. After all, whatever happened… it wasn't anything to do with us."

More to do with me than you might ever know.

Kira frowned, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"It's easier to get a bad reputation than a good one." He said simply. "We'll just have to work hard to mend the damage done. 5-Bantai and 9-Bantai are in the same position as we are, after all. Given

time, I'm sure, the wounds will heal."

With that he pushed open the door of the barracks, hurrying through the hallways to the corner of the building which housed his own Vice Captain's office.

As he opened the door, he saw that the 10-Bantai Captain was already waiting for him, and he faltered for a moment, then stepped inside, closing the door behind him as he bowed his head towards his superior officer.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Hitsugaya-taichou." He said properly. "I hope you haven't been here too long."

"No, though when your men didn't know where to find you, I wondered if you'd decided to make an escape, too." Hitsugaya said frankly, and Kira winced at the cutting tone in the young Captain's tones.

"I was outside, at the training grounds." he said now. "Some of the squad are anxious to begin normal manoeuvres again as soon as possible, so it's been in my thoughts too."

Well, so it was only half a lie.

"Ah." Hitsugaya looked thoughtful, and Kira was sure he wasn't fooled for a second. Still, he nodded, slipping his hand into the sash of his belt and producing a folded sheet of parchment.

"Since I'm nominally seeing to 5-Bantai's paperwork, I've been going through Aizen's files." He said frankly. "And I found this."

"This…?" Kira hesitated, then took the sheet of paper, unfolding it slowly and gazing at it in confusion. He glanced up.

"Taichou, I don't understand?"

"Me either, entirely." Hitsugaya admitted. "It looks like it came from a report, but the rest of it seems to have been lost in the ether. I'm fairly sure it's from before Aizen's time as Captain, so whatever it is doesn't relate to the conspiracy of the last few months."

"It looks like it came from an official document." Kira agreed, smoothing it out carefully. "But… why have you brought it here? I don't…"

"3-Bantai are at a loss at the moment, aren't they?" Hitsugaya's eyebrow arched as he regarded the taller man coolly. "And I'm certainly far too busy with 5-Bantai and 10-Bantai to be worrying about things from before I was in office. However…"

He slid his hand into his sash once more, producing a key.

“The page comes from a report which looks like it has to do with the confinement of deadly weaponry which for one reason or another could not be permanently destroyed.” He said evenly. “Among them, *zanpakutou*. This key was kept with it, so I imagine the two are connected. I don’t know if this is something Aizen discovered and used to his advantage when perfecting his skills, but from the bits and pieces I’ve found in his office, I think it’s likely that he experimented at least a little bit with some of the blades listed on the other side of the page.”

“Listed?” Kira turned it over, his brow knitting together as he read down the column of names. “But… these are confiscated *zanpakutou*, Taichou? Weapons taken from people who… betrayed Soul Society?”

“Looks like it.” Hitsugaya nodded.

“And… you want me to…?”

“Take the key, and find the location of these swords, if it still exists.” Hitsugaya said frankly. “I’ve spoken to the Sou Taichou, and he’s agreed that it would be a good activity for 3-Bantai in order for them to regain their position in the eyes of Soul Society.”

Kira’s eyes widened in surprise.

“But… the Sou Taichou doesn’t know where they are, either?”

“Seems not.” Hitsugaya shook his head. “He knew where they *were*… but since Aizen and company took control of Central 46, a lot of things which were in specific places are no longer in those places. That key is a relatively new one — compared with the age of the record. It suggests they’ve been moved to a new, secure location, and I’ve pretty much ascertained that that’s not within 5-Bantai’s premises.”

He shrugged.

“So at the moment, he’s as much at a loss as anyone else.” He continued. “He *did* say that he remembered several of the cases — but in the absence of the actual weapons, that kind of information is only hearsay.”

“I see. I suppose so.” Kira agreed slowly. “And he thinks it would be good for 3-Bantai to do this?”

“Yes, seeing as they have no other pressing duties.” Hitsugaya nodded. “You too, as it happens, because I’m fed up of seeing you trudge around Seireitei as if the world’s weight was over your head.”

Kira's thoughts flitted to Wabisuke, and he offered a wry smile.

"Perhaps that's appropriate." He murmured. "But you're sure it's okay? If these are dangerous… that a Vice Captain should be taking on such a role?"

"Do you see anyone else here to command 3-Bantai?" Hitsugaya demanded, and Kira shook his head, his cheeks reddening.

"No, sir. I suppose not."

"Then stop asking questions and accept the order." Hitsugaya said frankly, dropping the key into Kira's palm. "In the absence of your own Captain, you'll report to me — understood? And be careful. We don't know precisely where it's buried… or where the entrance is. Probably somewhere within Central 46… and since you seem as well acquainted with the layout of that place as anyone else, it seemed right to put you in charge of the search. And of course, considering Ichimaru's involvement in Aizen's plans — it is just possible that a clue exists here in 3-Bantai's territory, too."

Kira's eyes widened, and slowly he nodded.

"I… I understand." He murmured. "I'll do as you say, Hitsugaya-taichou."

"Good." Hitsugaya nodded. "Don't make me regret handing it to you, all right? Yamamoto said it should be you or Hisagi, but since you've been inside Central 46 and since you're a former member of 5-Bantai, it seemed more beneficial to offer it your way. Besides… Hisagi isn't the kind of man to let his troubles get in the way of his work."

Kira pursed his lips, understanding both the implication and the criticism in his companion's words.

"Then tomorrow morning 3-Bantai will begin investigation into the matter." He said firmly, clasping the key tightly in his hands. "There are plenty of places in the archives to research these things, after all."

"Your thoroughness and attention to detail is the other reason I've given the key to you." Hitsugaya acknowledged. "You might as well put the skills that graduated you to full use, don't you think?"

"I'll try my best." Kira agreed, a faint flicker of pride stirring in his battered heart at this unexpected, off-handed praise. "I *did* always get the highest research marks when I was training, and I was the top student in my class, too, for most of the time. Given that, I think I can definitely dig up information."

“That’s the idea.” Hitsugaya nodded. “For the purpose, the Sou Taichou’s granting you access to the secure area of the Archives — you alone, mind. Not your subordinates. There are files there which are restricted to Captain’s access only — and you’re being given that privelege only on account of the fact for the time being you’re acting in charge of 3-Bantai. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Kira said soberly. “Besides, if there’s a list of some of the *zanpakutou*, it can’t be too hard to discover more about them and where they’re hidden. If Aizen-taichou *did* use them for his experiments, then they might be even more dangerous towards Soul Society come the Winter — and knowing what we can about them is a good idea. Plus, if the Special Forces have finished going through Ichimaru-taichou’s office, I might be able to take a look there, too. Special Forces are looking for evidence relating to the recent events, after all — and having been here for as long as I have, I might find something they missed.”

“You don’t need to call them ‘taichou’ any more.” Hitsugaya said frankly, and Kira chewed on his lip.

“I know.” he admitted. “But it seems wrong not to. Even now.”

“Well, either way, I’m leaving it to you to find these swords.” Hitsugaya concluded. “As you said, if they’ve been located and tampered with by Aizen, then we need to know about it. And if they’re simply dormant and have just been moved, well, we need to ensure they stay that way. These are weapons taken from powerful enemies, after all — even if their owners are long since dead, there’s no guaranteeing what might happen if they fell into the wrong hands. Not all of them are as owner-specific as your average *zanpakutou*, from what the Sou Taichou said… it’s very possible there might be implements there which could still cause damage if handled wrongly.”

Kira nodded, glancing back at the list once more. His brow creased as he caught sight of the bottom listed blade.

“Taichou… *this* one…” He murmured, and Hitsugaya nodded his head.

“It belonged to a predecessor of mine.” He said frankly. “Some guy called Shizuki. But I don’t know a damn thing about him. I’ve already been through my own office for anything left over by previous Captains, but there’s nothing I can find on this one, and no record in the main archives either, since I’ve had Matsumoto on it since this morning. Which means…”

“That whatever he did was pretty bad.” Kira murmured. “Bad

enough that he was killed and his sword taken into custody."

"Looks like it." Hitsugaya sighed. "The Sou Taichou hasn't said anything about him, so I haven't asked. But if you come across it in your research, you can add that information to your eventual report… the more we know the better. I don't like thinking that a prior Captain of my division was a traitor, after all. I guess when you have great power, you can also fall to the dark side."

He met Kira's gaze with a piercing one of his own.

"It's probably as well you know that, too." he reflected. "This squad's future rests in your hands, for the time being. Don't let Soul Society down… all right?"

With that he was gone, and Kira sank down into the seat behind his desk, smoothing the crumpled page out on the wood surface as he struggled to absorb the contents once more.

A secret storage chamber where confiscated *zanpakutou* and other weaponry had been sealed for years, away from the prying eyes of later generations. Had Aizen found them? Had he used them to perfect his own techniques, or as part of his attempts to access the powers possessed by Hueco Mundo's Hollows? Despite himself, Kira shivered. All of this, Ichimaru had been involved in too, he reminded himself darkly. All of this, Ichimaru had chosen to be a part of, too.

His eyes narrowed, and he slipped the key into the sash of his belt as cold resolve hardened in his heart.

I won't be like Ichimaru-taichou, though. I won't let Soul Society down. From hereon in, whatever it takes to rehabilitate 3-Bantai and prove I'm not a liability… whatever it takes, I'll do. No matter how hard it might seem. And I'll start with this. I'll find those weapons. No matter what.

Author's Note:

Since it's Hallowe'en weekend, two chapters up in quick succession :) In celebration of October 31st, it'd be cool to reach 31 reviews for this story (hint hint…:D)

You start to see where I'm going with Rain Dragon now, right…?

Something a little more explosive in store for the next chapter. Without too many spoilers, look out for Zabimaru making his story debut…

Chapter Thirteen:Baboon, Dragon & Sakura

Chapter Thirteen: The Baboon, the Dragon and the Sakura

"Nii-sama?"

Byakuya glanced up from his books, meeting the gaze of his adoptive sister with a faint flicker of the eyebrow as he set his brush down on the unit. At one side, a large pile of papers indicated that he had been engrossed in administration for the Kuchiki-ke's many expansive holdings, and at the sight of them Rukia seemed to hesitate, faint awkwardness touching her expression.

"I'm sorry to disturb you." She said properly, bowing her head in his direction as she slid the rest of her body into view. "But I was hoping I could talk to you about something… that is, if you're not too busy."

Byakuya eyed her for a moment, then he extended a hand, gesturing for her to cross the threshold and enter his study.

"What is it?" He asked softly, his tones low and well-cultured and Rukia did as she was bidden, pausing a foot or so away from his desk. For a moment there was silence, and Byakuya frowned, aware that the girl was trying to work out the best way to phrase her question.

"Nii-sama, is it true that the Kuchiki-ke hold the historical records for the whole of Soul Society?" Rukia spoke now, anxiety on her young face. Byakuya studied her for a moment, taking in the expression in her big eyes and he pursed his lips, deciphering their meaning as he did so. A faint flicker of irrational dislike stirred inside of him, as slowly he nodded his head.

"This has been the duty of the Kuchiki-ke for many generations." He agreed evenly. "Why?"

Rukia bit her lip, then,

"I'd like to look at… at something." She admitted slowly. "If… I… If I may. That is…"

Byakuya's eyes narrowed, as he interpreted her reticence. Then, as another sensation assailed his senses, he raised his voice, his gaze darting to the doorway.

"Kurosaki Ichigo." He said frankly. "Why do you hide yourself? Are

you such a coward that you cannot make a request face to face?”

At his words, dismay flooded Rukia’s expression, and she glanced towards the doorway as, sure enough, the spiky-haired youth stepped into view, an annoyed expression on his face.

“I’m not being a coward.” He objected. “Rukia said it’d be better for her to ask you than me, seeing as you hate me for kicking your ass a few weeks ago.”

“I see.” Byakuya arched an eyebrow. “Or perhaps you have enough sense of self to realise that your uncouth manners are not befitting for this place.”

“Ichigo!” Rukia glowered at her friend, then turned her attention back to her brother, clasping her hands together as she bowed her head once more towards him.

“Please, Nii-sama, don’t be angry with him.” She begged. “It’s my request too, and I thought… that you’d rather… it was me who asked.”

“You have no need to see records about times that happened before you were sent here, Rukia.”

Byakuya glanced at her, inwardly hating himself for the dismissiveness of his words, but finding himself unable to prevent them all the same. As much as his relationship with his adoptive sister had begun to improve over the course of the past few weeks, he could not completely overcome the faint flickers of envy that assailed him whenever Kurosaki Ichigo entered into the equation.

It wasn’t that he hated the boy — far from it, he knew he owed the teenager Rukia’s life. But even so, it did not mean that he welcomed the youngster’s invasion into his world and his home, knowing that, without a doubt, it would drag Rukia into more trouble and strife. And, much to Byakuya’s chagrin, Rukia would probably go willingly, for she had forged a friendship with Ichigo in the real world that, even now, defied Byakuya’s comprehension.

Like her bond with Renji, he reflected absently. Although he would never admit it to anyone, he had always felt faintly threatened by his sister’s close childhood amitie with his Vice Captain. Rukia had always bonded with those who dealt in rough honesty and raw values, putting their convictions before their manners as they strove to carve themselves into people’s notice, regardless of their birth or position in society. Shiba Kaien. Abarai Renji. And now, Kurosaki Ichigo.

Byakuya’s lip curled faintly at this thought.

You can take the child out of Rukongai, but it seems to be a lot more difficult to eradicate Rukongai from the child.

Yet still, since the events on Soukyoku Hill, he had felt especially protective of Rukia, his promises to Hisana still ringing in his ears.

“You know that the archives are not places that just anyone can delve, after all.” He said now, knowing he was being unreasonable but unable to prevent the words from passing his lips. “Particularly not ryoka — even ryoka who happen to take on Shinigami form.”

He fixed Ichigo with a piercing glance at this moment, and Ichigo returned it in kind.

“I’m a Shinigami rep, thanks to your Sou Taichou and Ukitake-san giving me my badge.” He said calmly. “Besides, all we want to know is some stuff from two hundred years back. Nothing to do with the current problem or Aizen or that situation — at least, I guess not. We’re just wondering what you know about a former captain by the name of Shizuki, that’s all. One who was around when the Quincy were exterminated in the real world.”

“Quincy?” Despite himself, Byakuya was floored. Then, “Why would someone like you need to know such a thing, Kurosaki Ichigo? You have even less reason to be interested in Soul Society’s history than Rukia does, and that was long before you were born.”

“True, but even so, if there’s anything here, Urahara-san said it’d be you who’d know.” Ichigo did not seem dissuaded. “Please, Byakuya. We really need your help.”

“Byakuya?” Byakuya echoed his name, emphasising its three syllables as he gazed at Ichigo in a pointed manner. “I don’t think I remember giving you permission to address me in such a familiar manner, boy.”

“And I thought we fought the last battle on the same side.” Ichigo folded his arms across his chest, and Byakuya pursed his lips.

“I don’t think that ryoka and Shinigami need to be on the ‘same side’.” He said coolly. “Nor do I think you have any reason to be here now. This is not your world. I’ve told you before. Go home. You’ll find yourself here soon enough when your life there has expired, after all. You do not need to concern yourself with us now.”

“Your Sou Taichou didn’t seem to mind letting me through.” Ichigo objected, and Byakuya’s lips twisted into a cool, humourless smile.

“He opened the Senkai Gate because you apparently had something

of import which you needed to discuss." He said flatly. "But enquiring into the past of a world that has no connection to you is beyond that remit. You are not here to pry into things that do not concern you — if that is your only reason for coming, you would do as well to return to your own world. People here are too busy, after all, to babysit your whims."

"On the contrary, I have to do just that." Ichigo shook his head.

"When Ichigo and the others were here, Nii-sama, something happened." Rukia interjected. "And we think it stems from two hundred years ago — from a captain who was involved in the negotiations with the Quincy — at the same time as Ginrei-jiisama."

Byakuya's brow furrowed slightly.

"Something happened?" He echoed softly. "You will have to be more specific, Rukia. Many things have 'happened' in the past few weeks."

"Ishida fought a battle against Kurotsuchi, and won." Ichigo said briefly. "But he lost his powers in fighting it. And since then — at least, since we came home — he's been acting hella strange."

"Ishida?" Byakuya looked foxed for a moment, then, "Ah. The Quincy boy."

"Yes." Rukia nodded.

"Then this is even less a problem for Soul Society's archives." Byakuya reached to pick up his brush once more. "The Quincy are no concern of ours."

"Dammit, Byakuya!" Ichigo exclaimed, and Byakuya raised his head, pure ice in his gaze.

"*Kuchiki-taichou.*" He said pointedly. "If you want to be a Shinigami, and must prance around wearing the *hakama* like you know something about it, then you will address me correctly. I will not be referred to by my given name by a ryoka — even if he is one who has become recognised by Soul Society."

"Oh, for God's sake." Ichigo began, but Rukia held up her hands.

"Nii-sama, Ichigo doesn't mean to be rude." She said softly. "It's just that we're worried about Ishida and that this might have repercussions for Soul Society. We think somehow the spirit of this captain has got inside of him and is trying to take him over. Ishida's already tried to attack Ichigo with Kidou, which is something the Quincy can't use. And he's here now — he was able to cross the divide

as a Shinigami, even though he shouldn't be able to do that. We don't know what we're up against, and we're asking for your help."

"Possessed…?" Byakuya hesitated, then shook his head. "Such a thing is not possible. The souls of dead Shinigami become spirit particles, then later reform to be reborn into the real world. They do not have any form in Soul Society once they have been scattered."

"We don't have any other explanation for it, though." Ichigo responded. "Ishida's had dreams, too — freaky dreams in which he saw your Grandpa an' this Shizuki guy talkin' about the Quincy."

"About my Grandfather?"

"Yeah. Ginrei, or whatever his name was."

Byakuya's eyes became near slits.

"You are discussing a highly respected and long serving member of the Gotei-13." he said blackly. "I will not tolerate you referring to him in such a casual manner."

"Whatever. Ginrei-san, then." Ichigo shrugged his shoulders. "Either way, Ishida described him perfectly — Urahara-san and Yoruichi-san both said so."

Byakuya gazed at him for a moment, then he sighed, dropping his brush back down into the tray and getting to his feet.

"I can see that administrative duties will have to wait until I've humoured you." He said wearily. "Since clearly you don't intend to leave otherwise."

"Thank you, Nii-sama." Gratitude flickered in Rukia's eyes. "We appreciate it."

"Follow me." Was all Byakuya vouchsafed.

"Byakuya, were you 6-Bantai-Taichou when this Shizuki guy was a Captain?" Ichigo asked as they fell into step behind the captain, making their way through a back door and down some winding stairs towards a long, lamplit corridor.

"I thought I had already instructed you on how I expect to be addressed by a non-seated, non-ranked Shinigami Representative." Byakuya said levelly, and Ichigo cursed.

"Ah, shit, whatever. Fine then. *Kuchiki-Taichou*, were you captain at the same time as this Shizuki?"

"How old do you imagine I am?" Byakuya shook his head

impatiently. “I only became Captain when my Grandfather died and I became head of the Kuchiki-ke. That was a long time after the elimination of the Quincy — and I do not ever remember a Captain by the name of Shizuki.”

“But you do know something, Nii-sama?”

“Regarding my Grandfather’s work, possibly.” Byakuya acknowledged. “Though I was not in the habit of discussing his work colleagues with him when I was just a boy. Or, in fact, colleagues long since gone before.”

“Ishida also mentioned a Shihouin-taichou.” Ichigo remembered. “Shihouin… Hirohito?”

“Shihouin Hirohito?” Byakuya looked thoughtful for a moment, then he shook his head. “No. My family have always had connections with the Shihouin clan, for better or for worse. But I do not remember a captain called Shihouin Hirohito. He, too, must’ve been before my time.”

“He died around the time of the Quincy massacre.” Ichigo agreed. “But I just wondered if you might know why. If your Gramps was there, and all.”

“I wish you would not speak so crudely.” Byakuya said crushingly. “It’s a sign of poor intellect, if you cannot phrase your questions in a more civil manner.”

“Are you ever going to let up with me?”

“You are asking for my help.” Byakuya reminded him. “If you wish to receive it, I advise you to cease your attempts to rile me. There will be no re-match with Senbonzakura today — the normal rules about *zanpakutou* release are fully in operation and besides, one fluke aside, you are not a fit opponent for me to waste my time in provoking.”

“Big words considering I beat you the last time.”

“Do you really think so?” Byakuya turned to eye him pensively. “Or was it something else that did that? I am not so foolish as to not know what took place during our fight, boy. That dark spirit that swung your sword was not you and should have taught you that you are not yet ready to wield Bankai against anyone. Learn from it and let well alone — unless you want your soul to be entirely consumed.”

“What the hell do you know about it?”

“Not as much as Urahara, I imagine.” Byakuya turned his attention back to the path ahead. “Speak to him about it. I’m sure he’d be most

enlightening."

Ichigo sighed heavily, but did not respond, and Byakuya found himself feeling slightly ashamed at having dropped to such a level of sparring with such an unworthy opponent.

"The main archives are normally accessible only by members of the Gotei-13 squads." He said instead, as they reached a doorway. "Since you are with Rukia, and here with the Sou Taichou's consent, I can permit you entry — however, there are areas which are more restricted, and only those of Captain's rank are permitted to enter and read that material. I do not have the time to play with you today, unfortunately — so for the time being you will have to make do with what is generally available."

"I guess it's better than nothing." Ichigo reflected. "If we can at least find out something about this Shizuki guy, well, we'll have something we can tell Ishida and he'll stop flapping around like an idiot quite so much."

"The Quincy is here in Soul Society, you said?"

"Yeah. Right now he's at 6-Bantai's barracks." Ichigo agreed. "Since none of us know what's going on with him, it seemed safer to leave him there. Besides, he's crappy company right at the minute. So he's better off there than here."

"I was under the impression that the Senkai Gate could only permit Shinigami to enter Soul Society without prior alterations."

"Right now, Ishida's body thinks he's a Shinigami, like me — at least, half of one. He's like Rukia in that he hasn't got a sword." Ichigo explained, and Byakuya's brows knitted together as he digested this information.

"Do you know something, Nii-sama?" Rukia asked eagerly. Slowly Byakuya shook his head.

"I have never heard of such a thing." He admitted. 'But then, until I encountered *this* boy,' He glared at Ichigo, "I had not met a human who was able to manifest Shinigami powers whilst still retaining his mortal life. Even so…"

He frowned, making up his mind.

"I do not know anything about your friend's situation, nor do I know about a Captain named Shizuki." He said briefly, addressing Rukia directly as some petty part of him could not allow his grey eyes to meet Ichigo's inquisitive brown ones. "But I have a feeling that

what you seek may not be so easily listed in the main archive itself. I cannot permit you to enter the restricted sections, because it would be against protocol, however…"

"However?" Ichigo pressed, and Byakuya sent him a disdainful look, then turned his attention back to his sister.

"You may wish to speak to your own Captain instead of me." He said frankly. "Ukitake Juushirou has been Captain of 13-Bantai since before I was born — certainly he most likely held office during the time period in which your interest lies. Perhaps, if you were to question him, he may remember this Captain named Shizuki."

"Of course!" Rukia's expression lightened. "I'd forgotten, but it's true — Ukitake-taichou *is* one of the longest serving Captains in the Gotei-13, and being that he's my Captain, he might be able to tell me something about what we want to know."

"Then after we're done here, I'll go back and tell Ishida what we've found, and you go bug him for details." Ichigo suggested. "Thanks, Bya… *Kuchiki-taichou*. That's a big help."

"Quincy are not suitable Shinigami material either, so it is in Soul Society's interests to fix this abberation as soon as possible." Byakuya said dismissively. "Do not spend too much time here, either of you — if it becomes too late, you might find yourself locked in."

With that he was gone, but even as he withdrew back to his own quarters, he could hear their voices as they set about tackling the task at hand.

"Well, that wasn't as hard as I thought it might be." That was Ichigo, and Byakuya pursed his lips in irritation.

"Asking Ukitake-taichou is a good idea, too. I hadn't thought of it, but it's obvious now I do." Was Rukia's response. "Let's see what we can dig out here first, though — since Nii-sama was kind enough to let us in."

"He really *has* gone soft on you." Was Ichigo's rejoinder. "So much to the good, though. An' I'm never goin' to remember t'call him Taichou, even if I need him on our side t'do this! It's not like I'm a squad Shinigami an' besides, it's not like I mean anythin' by callin' him his name. I do it to everyone, pretty much."

"Try." Came Rukia's advice. "Renji's right — Nii-sama has certain expectations and if you don't want him to dismiss you, you have to humour them. Soul Society nobility aren't the same as real world rules."

“Guess we’ll see how long it lasts, then.” Ichigo reflected. “Shi-i-it! There are a lot of books here, though.”

“I guess it’s an archive that goes back a long way.” Rukia reflected. “Shut up, all right? Let’s see what we can find.”

“Children.” Byakuya shook his head slightly, though a faint smile touched his lips as he returned to his office.

Rukia was happy, and he had helped. And at least, if she was going through books, no harm could easily befall her. Not even if she was in the company of the Kurosaki boy.

He pushed open the door of his office, sinking down at his desk and turning his gaze across the landscape to glance idly down at the section of Seireitei which housed the squad offices for all of the Gotei 13 Squads. A moment later, however, he was on his feet, hurrying to the window as an exclamation escaped his lips.

In the distance, yet clearly distinguishable as having come from 6-Bantai’s training ground, had been a distinctive flare of reddish light, followed by a small, yet significant explosion.

Byakuya stared for a moment, then clenched his fists, muttering a curse under his breath as he hurried from the room.

“What are you playing at, Renji, you fool!” He hissed, even as he stepped outside the estate and slipped into shunpo. “I leave the office for a few hours and you manage to blow bits of it up? How do you ever expect to make a Captain’s level if that’s how you treat your position? Believe you me, there had better be a good explanation for this!”

Across Seireitei, in the barracks of 6-Bantai, Renji too would have desperately liked a good explanation.

Standing back against the wall of the squad building, his sword in his hand and a gaggle of confused and half-scared young Shinigami in his stead, he bit his lip hard enough to taste blood, struggling to come to grips with what he was seeing.

Not six feet away stood his opponent, who moments earlier had so easily and unexpectedly fired the bolt of red fire across the training yard. Even though the assailant had dispensed with the incantation, Renji knew that it had been a shot of some significant force, for it had blown half of the roof clean off one of the outbuildings. A huge crack had subsequently seared through the stonework of the wall, as even now the once solid construction teetered and shook as though ready to

collapse in on itself. And now, perched atop the fallen pile of rubble that his shot had brought down, the attacker was squaring his fingers together once again.

Preparing for a second wave of Kidou magic.

Renji cursed, muttering every bad word he had ever heard on the streets of Inazuri as he squared himself up to defend both the squad building and his startled subordinates from the next round of attacks.

The morning had begun normally enough, he reflected, even as he clenched his fist more tightly around Zabimaru's hilt. At least, as normal as any morning could be when entertaining two human souls from the Real World among their midst. They had risen early, Ichigo, Uryuu and Rukia having eaten breakfast with the rest of 6-Bantai, and then, with Rukia and Ichigo having headed off to tackle Byakuya about records, Renji had gone about his normal duties. Uryuu had curled up in the corner of the small chamber with a book — from where he had obtained it, Renji was still at a loss — and his stiff demeanour had told even the brash Vice Captain that he wasn't in any mood to make small talk. Renji, who had plenty of other things on his mind had been only too happy to acquiesce, leaving the Quincy to his own devices while he had gathered together the group of young Shinigami he had intended to spend the morning whipping into fighting shape. They had none of them been with the squad more than a few months, most of them the young and green children of noble families that had been foisted on Byakuya's squad outside of the usual training channels, and as a result he had anticipated doing low level combat techniques, without any of the complication of *zanpakutou* releases or Kidou blasts.

But that had all changed the moment that Uryuu had decided to join his class.

Strictly speaking, Renji acknowledged, it wasn't exactly that Uryuu had actively decided to join them. In fact, Renji had barely noticed at first that the Quincy had left the 6-Bantai building and had perched on one of the surrounding walls, watching intently every move the clumsy youngsters made. It had only been when, in the midst of him explaining a particular sword technique to a confused young girl almost in tears that he had registered the boy's company, and by that point, it had already been too late to do anything about it.

By the time Uryuu had entered his line of vision, he had already prepared the Kidou blast, and had fired it before Renji could even react.

He had not spoken, but as soon as Renji had met his gaze, he had known that Uryuu was not acting on his own wits. Remembering Ichigo's claims from the previous night he cursed again, casting a glance across the training ground towards the barracks' main door. It was only a matter of metres away, but between it and him stood the Quincy, aura prickling with blue light and a steely determination in his gaze.

"Shit, Ishida, what the hell are you playing at?" He demanded. "Do you want me to lock you in a goddamn cell? Yeesh, Ichigo wasn't kidding — drop your hands, all right? I don't want to fight you, but if you keep playin' up like this, I will!"

"Abarai-fukutaichou, what's going on?" One of the junior Shinigami demanded, his voice shaking slightly as he regarded Ishida's glittering form. "Who is that? Why… why is he firing Kidou at us?"

"I don't know the answer to the second one, and I'm startin' to wonder about the first." Renji's eyes narrowed. "Listen — all of you, listen an' listen good. When I give you a signal, get yourselves inside barracks an' shut the door. Don't open it unless it's a Captain or a Vice Captain givin' the orders."

His gaze fell on the young girl he had helped moments earlier, eying her tearful face with a heavy sigh.

Shit, and where's Rukia when I need her? What the hell do I know anyway about crying girls? These goddamn nobles with their goddamn ways around normal protocol. I wish Taichou'd take in some brats with backbones — as it is he hands the headache onto me to deal with when he doesn't want to deal with it himself. I wonder how the kids' families would feel if they knew they were being trained by an Inazuri survivor, anyhow… at least if I was training Rukongai vagabonds, they'd have the guts to hold themselves together in a bad situation.

He shook his head, stifling his irritation as he reminded himself that, soft-hearted nobles or not, they were still young Shinigami and they were still under his command.

"For God's sake, don't let Kuchiki-taichou see any of you cryin', because it'll be my ass on the line if you do." He said frankly, meeting the female Shinigami's gaze with a meaningful one of his own. "If he comes back, tell him I've got it covered. Now get ready t'run when I tell you an' don't look back unless you want to be bitten in half by Zabimaru!"

"Yes, sir!"

As one the group assented, and Renji let out his breath in a rush.

So the Vice Captain's insignia did mean something, after all, even to a bunch of spoiled rich kids whose families had simply wanted to make ties with the head of the prestigious Kuchiki clan. Still, it would be scant consolation if he couldn't deal with one crazed Quincy and he knew that, if any of the juveniles got hurt, it would be him who would end up answering to Byakuya.

He raised Zabimaru, gauging Uryuu's tense form as he did so.

"*Now*!" He exclaimed, flicking his wrist to send his *zanpakutou* stretching out across the yard, its claw-like spines creating a cloud of dust which generated a smokescreen between his nervy pupils and the Quincy as he brought the wheeling weapon deftly against the pile of uneven rubble. "Run, all of you. Get the hell inside an' don't you dare come back out here — *no matter what*!"

They did not need to be told twice. Like frightened mice they scurried for the door, and at their movement, Uryuu's gaze seemed to flit across the ground, his indigo eyes narrowing as his fingers began to flicker with white energy.

"Shinigami." He murmured, as the white light grew bigger and bigger. "Thinking they can simply run away from me…"

"*I'm* not running away from you." Renji darted across the ground, reeling Zabimaru back in as he lunged to knock the Quincy off his perch with the flat of his hand. "You listen to me and you listen good, all right? Whatever's got into you, get it out already. This place has already seen enough shit — an' Taichou's already goin' to kill me for the one lot of damage you caused."

Uryuu toppled back under the force of the blow, and Renji spied his advantage to get the situation under control. He grabbed the teenager by the shoulders, pinning his slim body to the ground as he met dark indigo eyes with his own resolute gaze.

"You ain't goin' to beat me, so you might as well stop fighting." He added. "You're down on two counts, so surrender now an' we'll talk about it."

"Two counts?" Uryuu struggled to free himself, a cold glint in his intense blue eyes. "From a mere Vice Captain who shoots his mouth off? I don't think so."

"And *I'm* telling you that if you fight me, it won't jus' be your body you'll be severed from." Renji snapped back. "I might be 'just' a Vice Captain in whatever passes for your brain right now, but I grew up in

Rukongai, so I know a thing or two about fightin'. An' even if I ain't quite at Taichou's speed yet, I'm pretty damn strong. I don't know what's bitten your ass right at the minute, but you ain't strong enough to take down a Gotei Vice Captain with a Bankai in the wings… so don't make me use it, okay? Quit it now, while we're both in one piece. Ichigo'll be pissed at me if I wreck you over, after all."

Uryuu was silent for a moment, his lips thinning as he seemed to digest this. Then, beneath Renji's body, he brought his hands together.

"*Byakurai.*" he murmured, and Renji cursed, dodging aside just in time to see the fierce blast of white lightning pierce through the sky, striking through the branches of a tree and setting the entire thing alight. Had he been a split second later in his reaction time, it would have hit him square in the torso, flinging him back against the wall of the arena and, no doubt, dealing him a nasty blow in the process. It had not been a warning shot, either. At the moment Uryuu's fingers had struck the spell, there had been unmistakeable killer instinct in the boy's blue eyes.

"What the hell was that?" Renjji demanded, picking himself up as he regained his stance. "Are you seriously trying to kill me?"

"That depends on whether or not you get in my way." Uryuu hauled himself to his feet, light glinting eerily off his spectacles as he seemed to be preparing himself for another round.

"In your… way?" Renji blinked, and Uryuu nodded his head.

"This is 6-Bantai." He said softly. "Isn't it?"

"Yeah, so what the hell of it?" Renji frowned. "You know that, so don't give me shit."

He weaved Zabimaru in the air, a warning in his gaze.

"I'm serious, Ishida. You snap out of it or I'll have to hurt you. An' that'll piss a lot of people off — but that's still my job."

"The Kuchiki-ke's 6-Bantai?"

"Like I said, what of it?"

"I want to speak to Kuchiki-taichou." Uryuu said quietly. "About my *zanpakutou*."

"About your… what?" Renji's eyes almost fell out of his head. "What the hell are you talking about now? *Zanpakutou*? Ain't you the one who said last night that Quincys fire bows an' arrows an' it doesn't translate? What the hell would you need with a *zanpakutou*?

You might be wearin' the *hakama* right now, Ishida, but you are not a friggin' Shinigami an' you never have been!"

"You seem to be a pretty stupid Vice Captain." Uryuu eyed him coldly. "If you don't even understand why I might need a *zanpakutou*. And you've reached Bankai? Hard to believe."

"Stop it already, will you?" Renji was becoming exasperated by now. "Look, you want to see the Captain? Fine, except he ain't here. He's at his family's estate, doin' the paperwork, an…"

"On the contrary, Renji, I am right here."

A cold voice interrupted the discussion, and Renji froze, a chill running down his spine as he raised his gaze to once more meet his superior officer's cool grey eyes.

"T… Taichou?" He exclaimed, followed by, "I… I can explain!"

"I doubt that very much." Byakuya's gaze flitted to Uryuu's still glittering form, and he frowned, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

"I see that Rukia and her uncouth companion were not deceiving me." He reflected. "It seems the Quincy *has* gained Shinigami powers — though how or why I would not like to speculate."

"He started firin' at me when I was trainin' the juniors, so I sent 'em inside before he blew 'em half to pieces." Renji did not relax his grip on Zabimaru, watching Uryuu carefully out of the corner of his eye. "I ain't got a clue why he started, Taichou — or what's goin' on, t'be honest. But his blasts are pretty powerful. An' he was sayin' somethin' about seein' you — somethin' to do with a *zanpakutou*."

"A *zanpakutou*?" Byakuya cast Uryuu a startled glance, crossing the dusty ground and pausing a few feet away. "Well? Enough of this childish behaviour. I am Captain of 6-Bantai — though what you think I might know about Quincy and *zanpakutou* is anyone's guess."

Uryuu's expression underwent a transformation, and he stared at the nobleman, as if unable to fully comprehend what he was seeing. Slowly he shook his head.

"This isn't right." He murmured. "This… Kuchiki Ginrei is Captain of 6-Bantai. Kuchiki Ginrei…"

"Kuchiki Ginrei was my Grandfather." Renji saw something flit across his Captain's gaze. "He died some several years previously. I am Kuchiki *Byakuya*, the current Captain of 6-Bantai. But you already know that, Quincy."

Uryuu continued to stare at him, momentarily shaken from his conviction by Byakuya's cool, disinterested tones. Then he frowned, shaking his head again.

"You're wearing the *haori.*" He whispered. "But… it's not possible. It's not…"

Byakuya's gaze narrowed, and he stretched out his gloved arm, resting his fingers lightly on Uryuu's shoulder. Softly he murmured a spell, too quietly for Renji to hear the words, but as Uryuu's body stiffened and fell to the ground, the Vice Captain realised it had been a binding spell — and one of a high level.

He let out his breath in a rush, retracting Zabimaru as it shimmered back into its sleeping form.

"Do you think he'll snap out of it, now?" He asked hesitantly, walking over to prod Uryuu's still form with his toe. "Hey, Taichou, he's out cold — did you mean to do that?"

"So long as he is no longer causing havoc in my squad offices, I hardly think it matters whether or not he retains consciousness." Byakuya paused to survey the damage. "It seems he has already created considerable problems."

His gaze flitted to Renji.

"Protecting the juniors was well done." He said quietly. "Although you really do need to brush up on your Kidou, if you can't manage a simple binding spell to hold an opponent in place."

Renji grimaced, shrugging his shoulders as he returned Zabimaru to its sheath.

"I guess Kidou never was my strongest area." He admitted. "I'm sorry, Taichou. About the mess."

"No… I don't think this blame falls with you, even if you were remiss in not restraining him more swiftly." Byakuya knelt down beside Uryuu's motionless body, pursing his lips as he hovered his hand just above the boy's head. "Did you feel it, Renji, when he was ready to attack you? The pulsing, distinctive sense of a Shinigami's reiatsu, boiling up inside of him?"

"He had some power burnin' up in there, sure." Renji agreed. "But I was a touch busy to really try an' analyse it at all."

"I suppose so." Byakuya got to his feet, dusting his hands together absently. "In any case, that sensation is now gone. Whatever it was, I suspect it is over."

“Ichigo said that Ishida’d been possessed by a Shinigami.” Renji said slowly. “I didn’t think it was possible, but shit, now…”

“It is not possible.” Byakuya shook his head. “I do not know what this phenomenon is, but I am certain it is not possession. Shinigami do not retain physical form of any kind once their soul disperses into the ether. Whatever is afflicting the Quincy boy, it is not possession.”

His eyes narrowed.

“But even so, he asked for my Grandfather, and thought that somehow he knew something about a *zanpakutou*.” He reflected, gesturing for his subordinate officer to pick up the fallen Quincy and bring him inside. “I do not see how he could ask such questions without very specific Shinigami knowledge.”

“Does it mean anything to you, Taichou?” Renji scooped Uryuu up like a rag-doll, following his Captain into the building and along the hallway to the nobleman’s office. “We’re takin’ him in your office? When he went nuts like that… really? You don’t want to lock him up? Because…”

“Don’t be foolish.” Byakuya cut across him. “If he is capable of high level Kidou when in that state, a cell will not hold him. Besides, right now the effort has exhausted him. He is asleep, Renji. He is not knocked unconscious. He is not a threat to anyone like this — and I am more than capable of taking care of matters should that happen to change.”

“I guess so. Sorry.” Renji bit his lip.

“Kurosaki Ichigo said that whatever had happened was connected to the Quincy massacre, 200 years ago.” Byakuya continued, running a fine finger along the row of books on his shelf as he searched for the one he wanted. “I do not know much about this event, nor have I ever really bothered to find out. But I do know that my Grandfather was sent to the Real World as part of the negotiations. He did not speak of it to me, except in passing… and I did not give it much thought. However… ah. Here it is.”

He pulled the volume from the shelf, brushing off the dust.

“You can put the boy down on the sofa there. He will rest a while, and in a moment you can go and summon someone from 4-Bantai, to ensure he has no injuries to speak of beyond his obvious exhaustion.”

“Yes, sir.” Renji did as he was bidden, curiosity burning in his gaze. “What is that book, then, sir? I mean… something to do with Ginrei-sama…?”

“My Grandfather was a Captain for a long time, Renji.” Byakuya flicked open the book, pausing at a specific page. “In that time, he had many responsibilities. But it is one in particular that springs to mind. The Quincy mentioned a *zanpakutou*… he came here, to my office, as though he thought somehow to obtain it from me. Before I became a Captain, there was a vault kept sealed somewhere in Seireitei which housed *zanpakutou* and other confiscated weaponry belonging to people who, at various times had caused Soul Society trouble. Some were temporarily held during ongoing hearings and investigations, others locked away permanently since they could not be destroyed. The whereabouts of this vault was known about by only three Captains, as well as the Sou Taichou. Those were the then Captains of 5-Bantai, 3-Bantai and 6-Bantai. These Captains took it in turns to be responsible for the key. Grandfather never told me where it was, or anything much about it. But he did say that it had been a traditional duty of 6-Bantai, to bear the keys for ten years in every thirty, and as such, I should know of it just in case I was called on in the future to undertake it myself. However, the last Captain to bear the keys was the Captain of 5-Bantai, more than a century ago… then they disappeared and the vault was no longer mentioned, even between Captains.”

Renji leant up against the window-frame, folding his arms across his chest.

“Aizen-taichou was 5-Bantai Vice Captain round then, wasn’t he?” He asked softly, and Byakuya’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“I believe you are correct.” He murmured. “Perhaps there is a correlation.”

“Right now I’d bet my ass there is one.” Renji said frankly. “It wouldn’t surprise me a bit, considerin’ what he wanted to do to Rukia jus’ to get hold of some all-powerful gem.”

“Indeed.” Byakuya nodded. “Although for the present, that is neither here nor there. Rather, I wonder… if Grandfather was in charge of the keys at the time when the Quincy were exterminated.”

He sank down at his desk, his gaze flitting to Uryuu’s limp body.

“The Kurosaki boy mentioned a Captain from that time called Shizuki, about whom I know nothing.” He added. “But about whom my Grandfather apparently knew quite a lot.”

“But that would mean that Ishida *was* possessed, wouldn’t it?” Renji frowned. “If he knew shit from 200 years ago that even you don’t know about, Taichou…”

“I do not believe it is possible for a Shinigami to possess a living human being and drive it for his own ends, whatever they may be.” Byakuya shut the book with a snap. “But I do think that perhaps Kurosaki Ichigo was right to bring matters to our attention. Whatever reiatsu the boy was emitting, it was not familiar to me in any regard. Still, I sense the hand of another in this, somewhere… and I think it’s something we should get to the bottom of.”

His eyes narrowed once more.

“It does Soul Society no good at all if, so soon after all hell was unleashed, we have a rogue Shinigami roaming the streets firing spells at unsuspecting residents.” He added. “As a Captain, it’s my job to prevent that sort of adverse behaviour.”

Renji let out his breath in a rush.

“I’ll go to 4-Bantai.” He said at length. “An’ get someone t’come an’ poke Ishida, make sure he’s all right. I mean, he’s breathin’ an’ all, but you’re right. He must’ve been hella exhausted, cos his skin’s near grey an’ he’s sleepin’ like a log.”

“Do so.” Byakuya nodded, flicking his fingers in the direction of the doorway as if to dismiss his companion. “And Renji? What I have said to you this afternoon is not for public hearing. The story of the keys is an ancient one, but even so, the vault may yet still exist. It would be remiss indeed if rumours were to start to spread among the lower ranks about the existence of such a place. Do you understand?”

“Does that mean to Ichigo an’ Rukia, too?”

“If anything is to be said to them, I will be the one to say it.” Byakuya said firmly. “You are to say nothing without my leave.”

Renji sighed.

“Yes, sir.” He said heavily. “I get it. I won’t say a word.”

With that he withdrew from the office, casting a final glance back at the sleeping Uryuu as he did so.

“Whatever the Taichou says, I don’t see how it can be anythin’ but possession.” He muttered. “Shit, that kid’s got trouble brewin’ all right. Not only is all this goin’ on, but he’s gonna wake up t’hear Taichou lecture him on vandalisin’ 6-Bantai’s buildings… if you’ve any sense, Ishida, stay asleep. At least till I get back with someone from 4-Bantai to treat you!”

——

“Well, Nemu?”

As the 12-Bantai Vice Captain slipped back into her own squad buildings, Kurotsuchi was waiting for her, casting her a questioning glance. “Report, please. Was my test successful?”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu bowed her head, long braid tumbling over her shoulder as she did so. “As you predicted, the Quincy was susceptible to outside suggestion. When the trigger was released, he acted in the way you expected him to act, and successfully utilised two distinct Kidou spells in the process. The elements that he absorbed in Seireitei some months ago have responded to your treatment and are certainly active inside of him. It seems it won’t be long before Mayuri-sama’s plans come fully to fruition — and the two things become once more intermeshed.”

She paused, eying him for a moment, then,

“Mayuri-sama, will you want me to take the Quincy hostage now?” She asked softly, and Kurotsuchi’s eyes narrowed to near slits. Slowly he shook his head.

“A caged beast is no good to me just yet.” He said dismissively. “No. Let him run wild a little longer. I want to see *exactly* what the full effects are. This is the first time, Nemu, that all the parts of the puzzle have clicked so nicely into place. He is a precious test subject, after all — there is no hurry to rush the experiment along. We might as well be kind and give him some more time to adjust to the changes.”

He grinned, a malicious glint in his golden gaze.

“Or should I say, *re*-adjust?” He murmured thoughtfully. “Given the circumstances, yes — perhaps I should.”

He beckoned to his companion to follow him, turning on his heel and heading back towards the main research laboratory.

“There will be time to study and dissect him later.” He added. “Patience is a virtue, Nemu. Keep up your observation of him — and wait for my further orders.”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu nodded her head, although there was a faintly troubled glint in her dark eyes. “I understand.”

Author's note:
"Remember, Remember the Fifth of November, Gunpowder, Treason and Plot…"

Today is Guy Fawkes Day in the UK, so I figured I'd match fireworks with fireworks in this chapter. (For anyone who doesn't know, Guy Fawkes is in memorial celebration of the failure of rebels to blow up the Houses of Parliament and the King in 1605. Guy Fawkes was one of the plotters involved. The whole tale is a bit bloodthirsty and steeped in conspiracy… if you have time, go google it and you'll see what I mean!)

I have no idea if Byakuya does get noble kids foisted on his squad, but I can see it happening considering his position and the prestige of his family line. It's quite a funny picture, too, imagining Renji — who has no real time for noble airs and graces — trying to deal with a bunch of spoiled rich kids who haven't a clue which end of the zanpakutou is which. Plus, I figure Byakuya would take a lot of pleasure in handing that kind of duty over to Renji, both for his own amusement as much as to get the brats out of his own hair. (Isn't that what a Vice Captain is for, anyway?)

Oh yeah. I don't know whether Ginrei is or isn't actually dead in terms of canon, and I'm half expecting someone to poke that fact up somewhere if anything's been said officially that I've missed. For the purpose of this story, I'm working with the Kuchiki-ke operating on general traditional noble habits — that Byakuya inherited being head of the Clan on Ginrei's death. This is as much for the reason that in the Pendulum arc it was made fairly clear that Captains don't retire — they die, are disgraced or are promoted. And there's been no mention of Ginrei having been promoted. Equally, it seems very unlikely that he got kicked out for anything… which leaves him having passed on (or become so physically frail he is unable to do the job.)

The truth is, aside from Rukia and Byakuya, I don't really ever know much about the Kuchiki-ke as a whole. So who knows…? Ginrei may still be alive out there after all ;)
As for the zanpakutou… patience please!! :D

Chapter Fourteen: Old Bonds

Author's Note: Thank you to the people reading and reviewing Rain Dragon. Especially for Chapter 13. You just saved the story ^_^.

It sounds melodramatic, but I swear that this morning I was about ready to junk this story completely.

My PC managed to delete chapter 23 on my flash disk… basically eating the segment which was, so far, the most difficult scene in the whole story to write. It also ate the backup, which was very helpful of it.

I was not pleased. I'd just got it right. And it's been a chaotic enough week, with work and hospital appointments and God knows what else going on, so I really didn't need an extra thing to angst over. So for a while I really considered not doing anything about it at all.

*And **then** I opened my inbox and found I'd got two new positive reviews about the last uploaded chapter and they made me feel better. And since there are people reading this story and obviously (hopefully) caring about what happens next… I felt a little guilty that I was thinking about deleting something that folk apparently are enjoying, just because my PC had been a tit and my week had been a stressful one.*

*So, **ganbarimasu.***

As it is, I'll do my best to rewrite the chapter and hope that it carries the same effect the second time. I've redone the first half of it, and I'll tackle the difficult second part later when my head's a bit clearer. Onwards and upwards, with any luck.

***Thank you people who keep supporting and reviewing me, because it really does make a difference.** (Especially this time). Please keep doing so, and I'll keep doing my best to write a story that's worth your reading time :D Is it a deal? :)*

(If this was a Tenchi Muyou story, I'd be sending you Sasami cookies right about now, but I'm not sure Orihime's bean paste concoctions have the same appeal… so instead I'm uploading this chapter early as a kind of hopeful thank you. It has less calories, at least, right??)

Ok. On with the story now… just wanted to get that off my chest ;)

Chapter Fourteen: Old Bonds

"Unohana-taichou?"

Renji pushed open the door of the 4-Bantai treatment area, pausing to glance around the inside of the brightly lit, airy chamber for any sign of the Fourth Division's gentle-hearted captain. Fleeting memories of time spent here over the past few weeks touched his thoughts and he allowed himself a grim smile, inwardly making up his mind not to make his visits regular ones. Although the people of 4-Bantai were helpful and obliging, there was nothing he hated more than being useless, and he flexed and unflexed his sword hand absently, resolving that the next time he fought someone powerful, he wouldn't need Unohana Retsu and her subordinates playing angels of mercy in order to save his life.

He frowned, leaning up against the doorpost. The room at first appearance seemed empty, with no sign of either the Captain or her second in command anywhere in evidence, and he was about to go when he thought he saw a flicker of black *hakama* in the furthermost corner of the chamber.

"Unohana-taichou? Kotetsu-fukutaichou? Is anyone here?" He asked again, but there was once more no response, and a prickle touched his spine as he remembered that at the rear of this chamber led a passageway to the small room where 5-Bantai's Vice Captain, Hinamori Momo was still unconscious.

Though he rarely spoke of feelings to people, Renji had gone to school with Hinamori, and was fond of her, and he inwardly tensed, his fingers flicking towards his sword as he crossed the chamber in a matter of a few steps. Uryuu's predicament momentarily forgotten, he darted towards the doorway, his fears growing as he saw that it had been left slightly ajar to swing in the faint breeze. Slowly he pulled it back, slipping into the corridor and glancing all around him for any sign of company, but there was none.

His eyes narrowed.

From here, he knew, Hinamori's chamber was the only one occupied. And, as he considered it further, he realised that whoever had slipped through the rows of sick-beds to enter this secluded place, it had been someone dressed only in black.

"Someone who didn't have a *haori*, which counts out Unohana-taichou an' Hitsugaya-taichou, too." He muttered, his grip becoming

more firmly settled around Zabimaru's hilt as he inched towards the door of Hinamori's room. "Who else would come here? Other than me, who else would come visit Hinamori? And why did they ignore me when I called them? They gotta be up to no good, an' that's why. Well, I won't be lettin' anyone hurt that girl any more than she already has been. She's been through enough, so they better be prepared for trouble."

With that thought fresh in his mind he charged into the room, letting out a yell as he drew Zabimaru fully from its sheath in one sweeping movement. The room's other occupant gave a startled cry, and there was the clash of metal on metal as the supposed interloper instinctively drew his own weapon in self-defence.

As Renji's gaze met his opponent's, however, his eyes widened.

"Kira!"

"Abarai-kun." Kira faltered, then dropped his blade, his shoulders sagging with relief and embarrassment as he bowed his head in apology. "You surprised me — I didn't hear you coming and… I'm sorry."

"Hey, I drew first, so forget about it." Renji looked sheepish, sheathing his blade with an awkward shrug. "I'm the one who should be sorry, right? Chargin' in here an' expecting the worst."

"No…" Kira sighed, shaking his head as he slowly returned Wabisuke to its own scabbard. "No, I wouldn't have been surprised if you had drawn your sword on me on purpose, to be quite honest. I probably don't deserve any different, considering."

His eyes clouded, as his gaze shifted to the still form on the bed.

"All the apologies in the world can't make up for it." He added softly. "What happened to her is at least partly my fault — for believing in someone who shouldn't have been believed in… or no, for knowing in the end that he was doing bad things but not having the strength to stand out against him. Even though he promised Hinamori-kun wouldn't be hurt, I still… she still…"

He faltered, trailing off, and Renji clapped a hand down on his shoulder, taking in his friend's haggard, troubled features. The 3-Bantai Vice Captain did not look like he had slept properly in a while, he realised, and his blue eyes were heavy and preoccupied, making them look darker than their usual colour. He had always been thin, yet even to the straight-forward Renji it was clear that his former classmate had lost some weight and that though Ichimaru and his

companions were long gone, the memories of betrayal were still fresh in Kira's mind.

"You think about shit too much, as ever." He said acidly. "S'all over now, ain't it? Lots of people made mistakes. I turned on my Captain, don't forget. The last few weeks were full of craziness one way or another. It's done now."

He eyed his companion keenly.

"I should've thought of you, though, when I was tryin' to work out who'd come here an' see Hinamori." He added. "It's logical, now I think about it."

He scratched his head sheepishly.

"Let's keep the clash of blades a secret, huh?" He concluded. "Noone else need know about it. Hinamori's in no state to play witness, an' it ain't like we fought or anything. With everything that's goin' on, the last thing I want is another spell in one or other squad jail cell."

"Me either." Kira said fervently. "You don't need to worry about that, Abarai-kun. I'd rather noone did know about it… noone will hear about it from me."

Renji was silent for a moment, then,

"What are 3-Bantai doin', now that Ichimaru's gone?" He asked softly, and Kira shot him a startled look.

"Doing?"

"Mm. They ain't got a captain, or a replacement yet. I know that 5-Bantai's stuff's bein' done by the 10-Bantai Captain… what about yours?"

Kira looked preoccupied.

"Actually, it's funny you ask that now." He mused with a sigh. "Last night Hitsugaya-taichou came to speak to me about something he wanted 3-Bantai to look into. I spent a lot of last night going over what he gave me, in actual fact — on the one hand, it's sort of a relief to have a distraction. But on the other, I'm worried about making a mistake. I feel a little like I'm on my last chance — so I suppose it's preying on my mind a bit."

"You're assigned somethin' you don't want to screw up, but you're skivin' off here instead of diggin' into it?" Renji's eyes narrowed, and Kira shrugged.

“No.” He said evenly. “But I’ve been working most of the night. This morning I assigned people to check out certain things, and until Special Operations have cleared out of Ichimaru-taichou’s office completely, I can’t do any work there. After I leave here, I’ve got a busy list of things to be doing — but I haven’t been to see Hinamori-kun in a few days. And I suppose I just felt a little like I should.”

“I see.” Renji dropped down into an empty seat, eying his friend pensively.

“So it’s still that way, is it? Even after all this time.”

“That way?” Kira looked startled, and Renji grinned.

“You an’ Hinamori.” He said frankly, and Kira reddened despite himself.

“Shut up.” He protested. “It’s not like that — we’re friends and I let her down, that’s all. It’s never been anything more than that — so don’t start teasing me. My head’s full enough without your help, thank you.”

“Hey, I went to class with you for long enough — shared dorms at times, too.” Renji sat back in his chair, amusement lighting up his rough features. “You ain’t kidding anyone, Kira. You’ve had it bad for Hinamori since the day you met her, pretty much. It ain’t any different jus’ because you were too much of a coward to do anythin’ about it. An’ it’s still the same now, isn’t it? You still like her. Even now.”

“It could go both ways, you know.” Kira’s eyes narrowed. “I could needle *you* some more about Kuchiki-san, if you want to go down that line.”

“Rukia and I grew up together, so it’s entirely different.” Renji objected, and Kira grinned faintly, his troubled blue eyes briefly lighting up and softening his worn features in an instant.

“You’re just as bad as I am, in the end.” He reflected. “Neither one of us has ever been that good at articulating things to people when they needed to be said, have we?”

“Guess not.” Renji admitted ruefully. “But listen — Kira, Aizen’s gone now. When Hinamori wakes up — and she will — she’s goin’ to need support. You oughta pull yourself together an’ be part of it. Okay? You, me an’ her, we went through some shit back in trainin’. But you’re still two of the folk I consider good buddies even though we’re no longer in the same squad. An’ I ain’t goin’ to ignore it, if she wants to talk t’me about it, but I ain’t the one who’s good at girls an’ cryin’ and shit like that. So you should take your chance. She’ll need a

friend, after all. An' you got screwed over too, in the end."

"I think maybe I got what I deserved for trusting without questioning." Kira said sadly. "Whether she'll forgive me or not is anyone's guess. Besides, Hitsugaya-taichou has been watching over her like a hawk, too. I think that's part of the reason he gave me this assignment, to be honest. To keep me as busy as possible — and maybe, out of Hinamori-kun's way."

"You think the chibi-taichou is that sly?" Renji looked surprised, and despite himself Kira laughed.

"You better not let anyone else hear you call him that." He warned. "I'm not going to take the flack for it, Abarai-kun, if they do."

"Noone's here but us and her, and she's lost to the world still." Renji's gaze flitted to the sleeping Hinamori.

"So 3-Bantai are busy?"

"I suppose."

"You don't seem in a hurry to get back to them."

"You're saying that I ought to be doing more, aren't you?" Kira asked softy, and Renji frowned.

"I didn't say that." He said, shaking his head in irritation. "I told you already, you're thinking about it way too much. I was just askin' a question. I ain't seen much of you since it all kicked off."

"Everything's changed, hasn't it." Kira observed pensively. "I'm sorry, Abarai-kun. I suppose I've had a lot to think about… with one thing or another."

He smiled slightly.

"I'm not Captain material." He said matter-of-factly. "I know that, and I haven't even reached Bankai yet — so you've surpassed me this time. You probably would have anyhow, if not for Ichimaru-taichou and Aizen-taichou's wheeler-dealing. I probably shouldn't even be a Vice Captain, to be frank. So 3-Bantai is basically where it was before. Better, perhaps, than 5-Bantai. Everyone's pretty lost, though. Everyone depended on Ichimaru-taichou and he took care of pretty much everything that needed to be. He had complete control… so I guess you could say 3-Bantai is in limbo."

He shrugged.

"I was called before a Captain's Meeting yesterday morning." He added. "The Sou Taichou made it clear that he was leaving 3-Bantai in

my hands for the time being. But also that he was… how shall I put it… keeping his eye on me. I don't know if he — or anyone — really trusts me anymore. Or if this assignment is really a test to make or break me as Vice Captain."

"You really are determined to feel sorry for yourself, ain't you?"

"It's not that. I'm just answering your question. We're still in shock. That's all. Some wounds take longer to heal than others."

Kira glanced back towards Hinamori, and Renji saw his expression cloud once more.

"Hers more than mine, I think." He murmured softly. "It was him, after all. Aizen. He was the one who hurt her. If it had been Ichimaru-taichou, then it would have been one thing. But she idolised Aizen-taichou so much. To be stabbed by his blade… even if she heals in body, her mind won't. Not so quickly. It couldn't."

"Are you talkin' about you or about her now?" Renji demanded, grabbing his companion by the shoulders and giving him a little shake. "You're acting the same way, like a dog who's lost his master."

Kira laughed sheepishly.

"Yeah, a little bit." He agreed. "But it's all right, Abarai-kun. I'm not just feeling sorry for myself. Really. Something else is there, too."

He detached Renji's fingers from his *hakama*, brushing the black fabric down as if removing imaginary specks of dust from its folds.

"I might not be a good Vice Captain, but I'm the only one 3-Bantai has, and noone's stripped me of the rank yet." He added. "The Sou Taichou made it clear that what I did from now on would determine whether or not I kept that position, so I'm doing my best to hold it together and earn my badge. Besides, it isn't just regret or self-pity that betrayal brings, either. It's anger too. Since I left the Captain's Meeting the other morning, I've stopped being so afraid of being punished and started feeling the other side of it. And I *am* angry, Abarai-kun. Angrier than I've probably ever been — at Ichimaru-taichou, at Aizen-taichou, but most of all at me for being so weak. I won't make that mistake again, I'm decided. When the battle comes, I won't be hesitating. Somehow, by then, I'll be stronger."

"Kira…" Renji stared at him for a moment, then clapped a warm hand firmly across his comrade's shoulders, almost sending him flying across the small side-room.

"That's more like it." He said approvingly, and Kira shrugged,

reaching out for the wall to steady his balance.

“There’s nothing else I can do, or should do.” He said simply. “For Hinamori-kun’s sake, for my sake, for the sake of Soul Society as a whole. That’s what we’re here for. So that’s what I’ll do. Somehow.”

He cast Renji a glance.

“Did you come here to see her too?” He asked, and Renji’s eyes widened as he remembered his original purpose in coming to the 4-Bantai block.

“Ahh, shit, I almost forgot! I was lookin’ for Unohana-taichou — or any of 4-Bantai would do. The place is pretty damn deserted, though — seems like there’s just us here.”

“There is.” Kira confirmed. “4-Bantai are on a training mission. In light of the casualties suffered in the recent weeks, I think Unohana-taichou wants to be prepared. There’s a war coming, after all. What we’ll face in the winter will be much worse than what we faced this time — she wants to be ready and I don’t blame her. People will probably be killed, this time, after all.”

He eyed his friend curiously.

“Is someone hurt, then? If you’re looking for 4-Bantai…?”

“Mm. Yeah. Kinda.” Renji pursed his lips. “Actually, it’s a touch complicated. You know the Senkai Gate was opened last night, don’t you?”

“The Senkai…?” Kira shook his head. “Should I have done? It’s not like I’m party to every squad’s in and outgoings.”

“No. This was different. Ichigo an’ his crazy ryoka friends asking for Soul Society’s help.” Renji shook his head, and Kira’s expression became mystified.

“Kurosaki-san… has come back?” He asked, and Renji nodded.

“Yeah.” He agreed. “An’ there’s a lot I can’t say, because Taichou’ll have my butt if I do. But let’s just say that Ichigo’s Quincy buddy ain’t quite been acting himself lately.”

He brushed the hilt of his sword ruefully.

“We had a little scrap this mornin’, and the Taichou came an’ put a bindin’ spell on him, because it was the only way to stop him firin’ Kidou and tryin’ to blow up 6-Bantai’s offices.” He added glibly.

“*What*?” Kira’s eyes almost fell out of his head, and Renji shrugged.

“Taichou doesn’t think it’s possible, but if you ask me it’s like some Shinigami’s ghost has taken up home inside of the kid, an’ is using him to cause a shitload of trouble.” He added casually.

“But…?”

“Sounds crazy, doesn’t it? But it’s the only answer anyone has for it.”

“*Is* it even possible?” Kira gathered his wits. “Abarai-kun, Shinigami souls dissipate into particles of spirit energy when the Shinigami passes away. They don’t become ghosts or haunt Seireitei. Given that…”

“I know. I know that.” Renji said impatiently. “I’m not stupid — I studied the same shit you did, if you hadn’t forgotten. But after today, I can’t see what else’d explain it. If it’s possible or if it’s not, I don’t know. But either way, it’s the only solution we’ve come up with.”

“I guess we’ve both got mysteries handed our way then, haven’t we?” Kira sighed, and Renji eyed him keenly, even as he got to his feet.

“Hitsugaya-taichou’s mission is cryptic too, huh?” He asked, and Kira shrugged.

“Maybe, maybe not.” He admitted. “I don’t know, yet. He wants me to track down the whereabouts of a locked vault — someplace where confiscated weaponry was sealed a long time ago. Apparently someone was clever enough to lock it and then forget where they left it — or something. Even the Sou Taichou doesn’t know. So because they’re afraid Aizen-taichou might have tampered with the contents— or even stolen them — they want me, and the rest of 3-Bantai to investigate.”

“A sealed vault?” Renji’s eyes widened for a moment. “Where *zanpakutou* an’ stuff are locked up?”

“Yes… something like that. Why?”

Renji pursed his lips.

“An’ you have a list? Like… you know somethin’ about what’s in that vault?”

“A little, but not much. And besides, Abarai-kun, I’m not sure if I should tell you anything else about it. It is a mission, after all, and…”

“Forget that.” Renji said impatiently, grabbing Kira by the shoulders. “Kira, listen to me. Think real carefully, okay? On the list

you got from Hitsugaya-taichou, was there anythin' on there about what kind of weapons were sealed in this vault?"

"Like I said, a little." Kira looked startled, disentangling himself from his former classmate's grip. "Abarai-kun, what are you getting so excited about? It's nothing to do with 6-Bantai — and you already have enough on your plate as it is!"

"Was there anything on this list about a Captain's *zanpakutou*?" Renji asked softly, and Kira froze, meeting his friend's gaze in surprise. Renji's lips twitched into a smile.

"There was." He deduced. "I'm goin' out on a limb here — but the name of that Captain — it wasn't *Shizuki*, was it?"

Kira's eyes almost fell out of his head for a second time, and Renji clasped his hands together in triumph.

"I knew it." He muttered. "*That's* what this is all about. That's what Ichigo and Ishida were babbling on about. It's him. That guy. Shizuki. He's the key."

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute!" Kira objected, holding up his hands. "What do you mean? What do you know about Shizuki-taichou…?"

"Not a damn thing." Renji told him cheerfully. "An' I can't tell you any more of anythin' else because Kuchiki-taichou's pretty hot on me keepin' my lip buttoned. But listen, I'll make a deal with you. You come help me track down some idiot from 4-Bantai to come and dab Ishida's bruises, an' I'll take you to see my Captain. Because if he knows what you're doin', he might tell you somethin' that'll help… an' you might be able to do the same in return for us."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Kira admitted. "But if you really think Kuchiki-taichou might know something about this vault… he is the keeper of the Archives, after all, so I guess it couldn't hurt."

"Right." Renji nodded. "So come on. It's even got me curious now — I want to know who this Shizuki guy was and why it is noone seems to have ever heard of him!"

So, Kurosaki-kun had gone back to Soul Society.

Orihime sighed, her heart heavy as she made the short walk across town in the direction of the Urahara Shouten. Although she knew that he had gone in order to help Uryuu, she still felt sad — as though he

had somehow been able to help, but she, as ever, had been somehow lacking.

Ishida-kun seemed so confused, when he came back to himself. And if it was me, I'd be scared… he must be feeling pretty rough about what happened.

Orihime kicked absently at a pebble, watching it skim across the pavement and into the grid of the drain below.

So it's perfectly natural for me to go to Urahara-san's shop and see him. He must feel a prisoner there, at the moment, and although Urahara-san and Yoruichi-san have always helped us, they must be busy… so he's probably bored.

If Orihime was honest to herself, however, she knew she was going to the Shouten for another reason. The night before, whilst making an evening snack, she had had the distinct sense that something was not right. Although she had felt the spiritual aura of the Senkai Gate before, and had easily coupled it in her mind with the disappearance of Ichigo's reiatsu from her senses, it had stuck in her thoughts, bothering her and giving her a restless night.

She couldn't explain it, even to herself. But something had happened. And the sooner she got to the Shouten, the sooner she'd know what it was.

"Inoue-san!"

Urahara was waiting for her as she arrived, stopping in surprise as she met the inquisitive gaze of the enigmatic shop-keeper. "Well, I was wondering how long it would be before you came here. I've been expecting you — come on in."

"Expecting me?" Orihime was taken off guard. "Really? But how? I only decided to come here as I left school — and I didn't tell anyone where I was coming."

"Ah." Urahara's lips twitched into a smile. "But last night you felt the doorway to Soul Society open, didn't you? And you felt Kurosaki-san's reiatsu disappear through it — correct?"

"Well, yes, but…"

"And now you've come here to find out how you can help, even though you know full well that you can't pass as easily through the Gate as your friend?"

Orihime flushed red, nodding her head.

“I’m not as strong as Kurosaki-kun.” She said earnestly. “But yes. I came to see Ishida-kun. And to see if I could help. Because… last night… it felt weird. And I don’t know why it felt weird — it just did.”

She sighed.

“With everything that happened the other day, I suppose it worried me.” She admitted.

Urahara nodded thoughtfully.

“Your spiritual wits are so much sharper than your Shinigami friend.” He reflected wryly. “But it’s all right. As I said, I expected you. Come on inside — Tessai has just made fresh tea.”

He turned, disappearing back between the wooden shutters and Orihime obediently followed him, stepping carefully over the threshold and into the shop itself. Urahara led her past the rows of unidentifiable produce and boxes of random candy, pushing back the screen at the rear and beckoning for her to join him in the room beyond. Orihime did so, stopping dead in the doorway as she registered the chamber’s other occupant.

“Sado-kun!”

“Inoue.” Chad was just as startled as she was, then he smiled. “So you came, too.”

“I guess.” Orihime sank down onto a mat, absently accepting the tea that Tessai pushed her way. “Thank you, Tessai-san. So you felt it too, Sado-kun? The Gate opening last night — and Kurosaki-kun going through it?”

“Yes.” Chad nodded his head. “And… something else.”

“Yes.” Orihime’s gaze clouded. “Something else.”

She glanced around her, taking a sip of her drink.

“Urahara-san, where’s Ishida-kun?” She asked. “He was staying with you, wasn’t he, until we found a solution to his problem?”

“Ah.” Urahara looked amused, shrugging his shoulders. ‘That’s something of a tricky question to answer, Inoue-san. In part, I suppose, you could say that he’s through there.’ He gestured to a side door. “But equally, you could say that he’s not.”

“Huh?” Orihime’s eyes widened, and she glanced at Chad as if hoping for an explanation. Chad merely shrugged, however, shaking his head.

“I’m glad to have the both of you here, however.” Urahara continued, scooping up his own mug of tea and taking a sip. “This is good, Tessai. My compliments, as ever.”

“My pleasure, Tenchou.” Tessai bowed his head in acknowledgement of the praise. “Now your visitors are here, I’ll go and make sure that Jinta-dono’s completed the tasks I set him — please excuse me.”

With that he withdrew, leaving the two teenagers alone with the enigmatic shopkeeper, and for a moment there was silence. Then Urahara nodded his head.

“Yoruichi-san trained you both well.” He reflected. “For you to come here of your own accord, without any summons or explanation — I’m impressed.”

He glanced at Chad.

“Sado-san — how much of recent events are you aware of?”

“A little.” Chad responded. “Ichigo told me something… at school yesterday. About Ishida, and how he… wasn’t himself.”

Despite herself Orihime flushed red, hoping that Ichigo had been prudent enough to keep Uryuu’s full behaviour to himself. Urahara nodded, however, setting his mug down.

“I see. Then that makes things quicker.” He reflected. “Inoue-san? If I might trouble you to open the door to your left — I think you’ll understand a little better why Ishida-san is not joining us for tea this evening.”

“To the left?” Orihime frowned, but got to her feet, obediently crossing the chamber and sliding back the partition door. As she did so, she caught sight of Ichigo’s sleeping body, and then, as her gaze strayed across the chamber, she let out an exclamation.

“But… Ishida-kun? What… what happened!”

Forgetting for a moment where she was, she hurried down at the boy’s side, her hands halfway to her hairpins as she summoned the will to heal him, but before she could do so, Urahara put a hand on her shoulder, pulling her back.

“It’s quite all right, Inoue-san.” He said softly. “He doesn’t need your *Rikka* shield this time.”

“But… what have you done to him?” Orihime sent the shopkeeper a frightened glance. “He looks… he looks as dead as Kurosaki-kun!”

“Precisely.” Urahara nodded his head.

“But…”

“Last night, Ishida-san accompanied Kurosaki-san to Soul Society.” Urahara said glibly. “And left his body in my careful custody until his return.”

He guided the startled girl back into the other room, shutting the door with a click.

“I’m sorry if I’ve startled you — but it seemed to be the quickest way to get my message across.”

Chad’s eyes narrowed, and he gazed at Urahara thoughtfully.

“Ishida couldn’t go to Soul Society that easily.” He said quietly. “What’s happened to him, in order that he could?”

“Very astute.” Urahara nodded, re-taking his seat as Orihime shakily took hers, her fingers gripping the ceramic mug tightly as she struggled to comprehend what she had seen. “Unfortunately, I don’t know all the answers to that question. Though, obviously, I’d quite like to. It’s very interesting, really.”

“Sado-kun is right, though.” Orihime gathered her wits, shooting Urahara an anxious glance. “Ishida-kun’s like us. He needs help to go to Soul Society. Doesn’t he?”

“Normally, yes.” Urahara agreed. “But I don’t think that ‘normal’ applies in this instance.”

Chad pursed his lips.

“Meaning that somehow, Ishida has gained the ability to become a Shinigami?” He asked softly. “And that he’s crossed over with Ichigo because of it?”

“Exactly.” Urahara nodded.

Orihime’s eyes widened.

“Wait a minute… seriously?” She demanded. “Ishida-kun… is… a… Shinigami?”

“Well, not quite.” Urahara shook his head. “As I said, we don’t really know what’s happened. But last night, while we were… discussing Kurosaki-san’s mission in entering the Senkai Gate, there was a slight accident and Ishida-san became separated from his body. It was quite a surprise, to be honest with you. But I believe in opportunism. It seemed wise to send him through the Gate too, in the

hopes of a quicker solution to the problem."

"This has something to do with what happened in the street the other day, doesn't it?" Orihime's brain was working now. "When I killed the Hollow, and Ishida-kun… wasn't Ishida-kun any more."

"I would imagine so." Urahara agreed.

"And so what we sensed last night was Ishida leaving his body?" Chad asked. Urahara inclined his head slightly.

"Yes."

Orihime let out a heavy sigh.

"So what do we do, now?" She asked helplessly. "Ishida-kun's in trouble and even though he has Kurosaki-kun to help him, I feel like we're being left behind. Sado-kun and I… we came because we want to help too. What can we do?"

"At the moment, Yoruichi-san is busy trying to speed up alterations on my Gate in order to allow you to pass through and join them in Soul Society." Urahara told her gently. "But it will still take a few days more, and you will just have to be patient. Whatever has happened to Ishida-san recently, it's beyond doubt that if I was to use Benihime's cane to relieve you both of your physical bodies, all I'd produce is chained souls. So there is no other way around it."

He smiled.

"Still, I'm glad you came." He mused. "Not only are your spiritual senses growing ever sharper, but your sense of camaraderie is highly impressive."

"After what happened in Soul Society before, how could we not care?" Orihime demanded, and Chad grunted his agreement, flexing and clenching his right fist absently.

"So far as we know, both Ishida-san and Kurosaki-san made it safely through the Gate into Soul Society last night." Urahara told them. "I have custody of their bodies, so there's no trouble there. All you can both do is go home — and wait for me to send you a message. When it's time, I'll call you — until then, try not to worry too much. All right? I'm sure that Kurosaki-san is doing what he can, and Ishida-san too."

"Even if you say that, it's hard not to worry." Orihime's brow creased in consternation. "Ishida-kun really wasn't himself the other day. And now this… Urahara-san, is he being taken over by a Shinigami, after all?"

“There are plenty of experiments I’d like to do in order to find that out.” Urahara admitted. “But for the time being, I know as much as you do in that regard. I will say this, though. I have checked through the few books I have from my time in Soul Society, looking to see if I had any reference to the Captain Ishida-san mentioned — the man called Shizuki. But there is no mention of him at all.”

“Does that mean that Ishida made him up?” Chad frowned. “I mean, not on purpose, but… whatever it is, isn’t actually real?”

“I don’t know.” Urahara shrugged his shoulders casually. “But I will say this. Ishida-san said that the man was Captain of 10-Bantai during the time of the Quincy massacre… and he described Kuchiki Ginrei in enough detail to make me believe his recollections were accurate. However… when I check through the list of Captain’s names for 10-Bantai… that period is not included. There is a ten year gap between one Captain’s name and another’s. And that gap in time just so happens to coincide with the massacre of the Quincy.”

“Someone wrote him out of history?” Orihime’s eyes widened.

“It seems that way.” Urahara rubbed his chin. “It’s all very mysterious, and I only have the barest bones of the papers I had when I was Captain of 12-Bantai. But Yoruichi-san has said that one of her ancestors — and predecessors — died in mysterious circumstances around the same time, also. It seems that Kuchiki Ginrei was the only one to come out of the Quincy matter unscathed — which is why I’ve sent Kurosaki-san to tackle the current Kuchiki encumbent about what records do and don’t exist for that time period. At least it’s a line of enquiry.”

“Byakuya-san will help us, surely?” Orihime bit her lip. “And Kuchiki-san… she’ll help too, when she knows.”

“I imagine so.” Urahara agreed. “They’re both heavily in your debt, after all.”

He grinned.

“Well, that’s all I can tell you, tantalising as it is.” He said frankly. “Go home and think it over — but be prepared to come back here at a moment’s notice. As soon as the Gate is ready, I’ll send word.”

“Then we’ll do that.” Chad got to his feet, casting Orihime a glance. “Come on, Inoue. If we stay here any longer we’ll only interrupt their preparations. There’s nothing we can do to help Ishida or Ichigo at present.”

“I suppose so.” Orihime got reluctantly to her feet. “All right. I’m

coming."

She paused, casting a glance towards the shut side door.

"Is Ishida-kun really all right, doing this?" She wondered softly. "His body's not used to it, after all."

"For the time being, so long as he maintains Shinigami form, his link to his body should not be broken." Urahara assured her. "But that's why time is of the essence. And why you must be ready to come back here on a moment's notice. It's a slim possibility that you'll be able to do anything to help here, in any case. But just in case you can… I think it's better to have that option available."

"And we'll be ready to go." Chad assured him frankly. "As soon as the Gate is, we'll be here."

"Like Sado-kun said." Orihime nodded her head. "We'll be here."

Author's note… *again*

Next part should answer a lot of questions about Shizuki. Oh yeah, and…

*Anyone curious about the zanpakutou issue, the next chapter should, erm, throw that particular issue wide open. I guess you can say that the next installment will involve Uryuu's first encounter with Shizuki's blade. Although it *might* not be in the way people quite expect!!*

*And because I can't say it enough… **thank you again** to the people who've supported this story and read and reviewed it as it's trundled along.*

You people rock.

Chapter Fifteen: Hassuiryou

Chapter Fifteen: Hassuiryou

The world was dark.

From somewhere in the swirling mists that obscured his vision, Uryuu struggled into an upright position, putting a hand to his head as he tried to get his bearings in the spinning, unstable world he had suddenly found himself inhabiting. As he did so, he realised that he wasn't wearing his glasses, and he cursed, reaching all around him to try and find them, but for some reason they were not at his side, and his heart clenched in his throat as a moment of panic stabbed through him.

He was stuck in unfamiliar surroundings, with no idea how he had gotten there. And worse, he could not clearly see his way ahead.

The scenery continued to twist and sway, blurred by his compromised vision and despite himself he felt nauseous, putting his hands out to support his unsteady frame as he closed his eyes against the shifting madness.

Where the hell was he?

As that thought darted across his senses, he tentatively reached out into the atmosphere, trying to locate any familiar reiatsu nearby, but the world was silent and he was alone. Somehow this unnerved him even further, and he grabbed at the ground, clenching his fists so tight that his knuckles went white. For a moment he allowed the panic to rule him, and as he did, he felt the ground lurch beneath him, as if somehow his uncertainty was directly connected to the stability of his surroundings. Though it seemed crazy, Uryuu clung to this moment of rational thinking, forcing his pulse to calm and his breathing to steady as he raised himself once more into a sitting position.

He opened his eyes, blinking against the blur as he tried once more to place his surroundings. Although his vision was poor and the light limited, he thought he could faintly make out the outlines of objects forming a horizon, and he struggled to his feet, taking a deep breath as the effort sent a wave of dizziness rebounding through his skull.

So, you have come here after all.

The voice stopped him in his tracks, and he gazed around him in

apprehension, struggling to place the speaker.

"Who are you?" He demanded, somehow comforted by the sound of his own voice, even echoing as it was in the dank, empty surroundings. "Whoever you are, come out and show yourself! I want to know what's going on, and where I am!"

Those are questions I should not have to answer, especially not to you.

The response was low spoken, and Uryuu could hear a note of disappointment in the speaker's soft tones. Despite himself he felt ashamed, as if somehow he'd done something he should not have, but then he got a grip on himself, forcing the thought away.

"How would I know!" He exclaimed. "I've never been here, and I don't know how I came to be here in the first place! Who are you and what is this? Are we still in Soul Society? Show yourself and give me some answers, before I get really mad!"

And how do you expect to fight with me, Quincy who has lost all of his spiritual power?

Now the voice was mocking, seemingly closer than it had been before, and Uryuu bristled, swinging around as he glared across the hazy landscape for any sign of his companion.

"What do you know about that?" He demanded suspiciously. "Are you Kurotsuchi? Is this one of his sick spells? Tell me! Tell me now!"
Kurotsuchi?

The voice sounded surprised, then,
Why would I be associated with someone you hate so badly, Uryuu?

At the casual use of his first name, Uryuu stiffened.

"I don't like being called that by strangers!" He yelled. "Whoever you are, what do you want with me? Come out and face me, or are you a coward? You can't pretend you know anything about me… I've never heard your voice before, so if you're not to do with Kurotsuchi, what the hell do you have to do with?"

The answer to that is elementary. I have everything to do with you, therefore I know everything I need to know about you. Why do you assume all strangers are automatically your enemy? You should at least understand before you start to accuse.

Out of the corner of his eye, Uryuu was aware of something long and glittering disappearing just out of his line of sight, and he swung around, but again there was nothing there.

“Then answer my questions properly! If you know so much about me, tell me what you want!”

At the present time, your body is unable to move. A powerful Shinigami Captain has put it under a binding spell, and you will not be able to break it until it wears off or until the one who placed it lifts it himself. For the time being, you have no need to be anywhere else, or do anything other than listen to me. Because we won’t have much time to talk, and this is the first time I’ve been able to reach you. It seems your brain is entirely too active, if it takes the interference of Kidou for it to be still enough for me to make contact.

In the darkness, Uryuu was suddenly aware of two glittering yellow orbs, and as they drew closer to him, he realised with a jolt of fear that they were not lights at all, but eyes — eyes belonging to something that was undoubtedly not human. As it drew nearer, he took a step backwards, suddenly aware of the sensation of hot, damp breath brushing his skin.

Are you afraid of me, Uryuu?

“What the hell do you think?” Uryuu struggled to regain his composure. “I can’t even see you, and you’re teasing me like I’m your plaything! And what did you mean, I can’t move? I can move fine! If I couldn’t, how would we be having this conversation?”

This conversation exists only in your thoughts.

There was a soft, swishing sound as though an immense beast was swinging its tail from side to side, and Uryuu had a sudden recollection of the Hollow he and Orihime had battled back in Karakura. His heart stilled in his chest for a moment.

“Are you… a Hollow?”

Don’t be foolish. I could not be further from such a thing if I tried.

Now the creature was mocking him, and Uryuu’s lips thinned, indignation and pride overtaking fear. He put his hands on his hips, glaring directly at the two glinting golden orbs that stared unblinkingly back at him.

“Then for the last time, tell me what you want with me!”

The beast did not answer him to begin with, then Uryuu was aware of something vaguely resembling a claw brushing against his arm, scales glittering in the dim light. He flinched, and the creature laughed.

You should open your eyes, and then you would see me more clearly.

With a jolt, Uryuu realised that the clawed beast had dropped something at his feet, and he bent down, picking the item up. Surprise flooded through him.

"My… glasses?"

***He** never needed them, so it was an oversight on my part that you do, even here. My apologies, Uryuu. It was not intentional.*

Uryuu frowned, sliding the spectacles back on his nose, and letting out a gasp as he saw his companion clearly for the first time.

Before him stood a creature at least twice his size, his body a mass of glittering azure and silver scales from head to foot. His head, set with those bright, penetrating amber eyes was long and equally scaled, with spines running from the crest down his long, leathery neck to the top of his spine. His snout was curved, his lips curled back to reveal sharp white fangs that glittered with intent in the mottled light of their surroundings, and beyond those terrible teeth, Uryuu was sure he could see the edges of an immense grey tongue.

Although the beast was big, there was a certain grace to his appearance also, and as Uryuu's gaze dropped to the animal's feet, he realised that the claws he had been aware of a bare few moments earlier were webbed together as if designed for swimming as much as walking on land. The creature was lithe and lean, with no extra weight anywhere on his body, and Uryuu had the distinct impression that he was capable of moving at considerable speed should the need allow. Just above his shoulders, large, folded, sheet-like things were arranged neatly against the azure backdrop, streaked with gossamer silver and glimmering with light. With a jolt, Uryuu realised that they were wings, and that although at present they seemed to take up little space at all, if they were to be spread out from side to side they would probably engulf him and the whole of his surroundings in their resultant wing-beat.

Behind him, bringing up the rear, Uryuu could now see the huge tail he had earlier heard swishing from side to side, and despite himself he swallowed hard, making out the distinctive, razor-sharp point at its tip.

For a moment, words failed him, then,

"What on earth are you?"
That's rich, considering who the question is coming from.

The creature seemed put out by this, his brow creasing slightly as he tilted his immense head on one side.

But I suppose that you really don't remember. And there's no reason, really, why you should. Because you shouldn't really see me at all, Uryuu.

"Well, I'm sorry to say that I can see you — although I'm sure I could've gone quite happily my whole life without it." Uryuu snapped back, a hint of his usual acerbic nature in his retort. "I want some answers, please. Why did you say I was under someone's spell? Who are you? *What* are you? Why are you here — and what do you want with me? Surely you can give me at least one of those things, rather than saying things that mean nothing at all!"

The beast sighed, lowering his immense body down onto the ground with unconscious grace and resting his head on his front claws.

You really don't remember.

"I'm pretty sure if we'd met before, I'd recall it." Uryuu retorted. "I don't know many giant lizard beasts, after all."
Lizard beast? How rude.

The creature was clearly offended by this, his spines prickling with indignation.

Don't you know a dragon when you see one, you foolish boy?

"Dragons only exist in myths and legends." Uryuu said firmly. "And I might have lost my Quincy powers, but I haven't lost my grip on what's real and what isn't."

Then let me ask you something else, Uryuu. What did your family name you, when you were born?

"Why are you asking me a question you know the answer to?" Uryuu was fast losing patience now. "Why do you keep answering my questions with more questions, dammit!"

I could say the same to you.

The creature's tail swished pensively for a moment, then,

I think it's ironic that a boy whose name means 'rain dragon' does not believe that dragons can exist.
"Kanji is one thing." Uryuu folded his arms across his chest. "If that's what you meant, you should've said so. But even so, it was just a name my Grandfather wanted me to be called. Mother and Father liked it, so they used it. And that's all. It might use the characters for rain and for dragon, but it's not necessarily significant that it does. Kanji can be used in a lot of different ways, after all. They just wanted to call me Uryuu — so they did."

And I had had the impression that you were a more intelligent soul than that.

The dragon sighed, shaking his head in resignation.

Very well. No wonder you don't know how to find me, if you can't even move beyond the narrow confines of your own understanding.

At this, the edges of his body began to blur and fade, and Uryuu frowned, holding up his hands.

"Wait a minute! You've told me nothing, and now you're going to go?"

You don't seem to want to talk to me — and we're certainly not at the point where we can make any progress.

The dragon eyed him accusingly.

Till you reach that point, I have nothing more to say to you.

Uryuu sighed, rubbing his temples.

"My head hurts." He muttered. "All right, whatever. My name means Rain Dragon. So what? I'm sure there are other kids with the same name. What's so special about mine?"

The dragon's tail swung from side to side for a moment, then he settled himself in a more comfortable position, the blurred edges of his body becoming distinct again as he nodded.

I can't blame you for not knowing things you weren't meant to know. As I said, you were not supposed to see me — so I shouldn't be angry with you about little things.
"Why not? Why would I not be able to see you? I've been able to see all kinds of things since I was small… and even if I don't believe in dragons, just supposing that was what you were — why does it matter if I see you or not?"
Because you are not the one who commanded me.

The dragon looked suddenly sad, and Uryuu frowned, biting his lip.

"Not the one who…?"

I have tried to speak with you several times in recent weeks, but you seem determined not to return my attempts. I had begun to think it futile.

The dragon continued, still looking decidedly melancholy, and over their heads, Uryuu was suddenly aware that the darkness of this strange limbo-world was caused by the denseness of rainclouds gathering above them. As the first spatters of silver liquid began to fall

around them, he cursed, shaking his head.

"Do you have to make it wet in here, too?"
I'm not the one who controls this place. You do. If you want it to stop raining, you will have to do something about it. About the whole situation… I told you.

"Fine." Uryuu sighed, exasperated. "Then tell me at least what you meant when you said I wasn't the one who commanded you? I don't understand."
No, I know you don't. You're a Quincy, after all.

The dragon's eyes flickered over his body for a moment, then,

But that you can see me at all proves that things are not as they should be. The one who commanded me is dead, after all. None other should ever be able to summon me from my sleep, or hear my voice. None other than the one I was summoned to serve… none other than him.

"But I'm seeing you, so that doesn't seem to pan out."
Yes.

The dragon nodded.

Which means that the unthinkable has happened. The past is colliding with the present, and it is a dangerous state of affairs. You must stop it, Uryuu. That you can see me means that you are in great danger of losing yourself completely — but I think you know already, don't you, that things are not as they should be.

"What do you know about that?" Uryuu asked suspiciously, and the dragon sighed again.
When you are ready to hear my name, I will tell you what I can.

He said resignedly.

Until you reach that point, I am helpless to do anything. But I will say this. The one who commanded me sought peace — and gained it. He has been at rest for two hundred years, and he should not be forced to walk this world again. His sins are behind him — and mine, too. The blood that stains us both has been washed away by time and new beginnings. Please, Uryuu, do not let him be made to suffer it again. Do not make him feel… the things he felt that day.

With that the dragon's body faded into nothing, and Uryuu sank to the ground, his hair and clothes becoming soaked by the ever more relentless rain as, from somewhere deep inside of him he thought he heard a woman's scream.

He swallowed hard, as emotions washed through him, and he

clutched his head, forcing them back.

“Niji.” he murmured. “Is that what this is about? This Niji? And… Shizuki? I don’t understand… I don’t understand!”

“Ishida? Ishida, can you hear me?”

In a moment, the darkness of the landscape and the sensation of being drenched flew away as Ichigo’s voice struck through his senses, and he opened his eyes, staring up in disorientated confusion at the sudden swirl of bright colours and lights that inundated his confused brain. He struggled to move, but found that he was unable to lift even a finger, and panic flooded through him a second time.

“It seems that he has returned to himself.”

That was another voice, cool and disinterested, and Uryuu struggled to place it in his disorientated brain. As he did so, he was aware of a hand hovering briefly over him, and then, as though someone had cut the invisible ropes restraining him, he found himself able to move.

He blinked, trying to pull himself into a sitting position as he gazed around him blankly. More unfamiliar surroundings greeted his attention, and as his eyes focused, he realised that the second speaker had been the 6-Bantai Captain. Briefly the dragon’s words about a binding spell flickered through his senses, and he eyed the nobleman warily. Had it been true, then? Had Byakuya put him under some kind of spell — had he been the one responsible for his sudden delusion, or was it something else?

“Are you all right?” Ichigo dropped down at his side, eying him with uncharacteristic concern. “You’re Ishida, right? Say somethin’, so I know who the hell you are.”

“Who else would I be, Kurosaki?” Uryuu gathered his wits, shooting his friend an irritated glance. “What is it with people asking me that all the time at the moment? Of course I’m Ishida.”

“Then whatever it is has definitely passed.” That was Renji’s voice, and as Uryuu’s gaze darted to the doorway, he made out the Vice Captain lounged up against the wooden post, relief clear on his face. At his side was an unfamiliar man of similar age, a book clutched in his hands and a look of consternation on his thin features, and Uryuu frowned, rubbing his temples as a sickening realisation began to sink in.

“I blacked out again, didn’t I?” He said softly, and Renji snorted

“Understatement of the century there.” He said frankly. “Try going postal and blasting up half of 6-Bantai’s buildings — or at least, you would’ve done if I hadn’t been there with Zabimaru t’stop you an’ the Taichou hadn’t put you under a binding spell.”

Uryuu’s face blanched, and he turned to stare at Byakuya in disbelief.

“I… did… what?” He murmured, and Byakuya’s grey eyes became thoughtful.

“Quite a considerable amount of damage for one apparently powerless Quincy.” He said softly. “It seems that there was good reason indeed for Urahara to send you to Soul Society — although for future reference I would rather you didn’t destroy land over which I have control.”

Uryuu bit his lip, burying his head in his hands.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered. “I don’t remember… but then, if you… and Abarai… if that’s what happened, then…”

“I don’t think it was your fault, Ishida-san.” The stranger spoke now, stepping into the room and pausing for a moment before kneeling down beside the sofa on which the Quincy was reposed. “In fact, it might have something to do with something we’re looking into.”

Uryuu’s gaze flitted to the newcomer, taking in the Vice Captain’s insignia strapped across his arm, and he frowned, making out the number as he did so.

“San… bantai?” He murmured, and the stranger nodded, an apologetic look on his face.

“I’m sorry. You don’t know who I am, and I’m badgering you.” He said sheepishly. “It’s just that Abarai-kun said you knew something about a Captain called Shizuki, and Kuchiki-taichou was showing me something when you started to come round.”

“Kira’s the Vice Captain for the third division.” Renji added. “He and I are old classmates, and it seems what he’s assigned to crosses paths with whatever craziness happened here this afternoon. I figured, the sooner we solve it, the better for everyone — so I brought him here.”

“If he’s an old friend of Renji’s, and a Vice Captain, I’m guessing he’ll probably be able to help.” Ichigo added. “Listen, Ishida, while you were out cold, Rukia an’ I finished looking though stuff in the

main archives. There ain't a single record there mentioning this Shizuki guy. Not one. But guess what? Kira's got this piece of paper from a report, and that has his name on it. An' another thing…"

"Slow down, Ichigo." Renji interrupted. "He still looks half on another planet. Give him a moment to digest what we've already said, all right?"

"But this is important." Ichigo said frankly. "Rukia's gone to speak to her Captain, because he would'a been here at the right time to have known a Captain called Shizuki. But the fact he's mentioned on Kira's bit of paper proves he exists… and his name…"

"His name?" Uryuu eyed Ichigo in confusion. "We already know his name. Don't we? Shizuki. Captain of the 10-Bantai when the Quincy were massacred."

Kira hesitated for a moment, glancing across at Byakuya.

"Kuchiki-taichou, is it all right for me to show Ishida-san the paper Hitsugaya-taichou gave me?" He asked anxiously. "It seemed to have come from a report, so…"

"In the circumstances, I don't see what would be gained by not doing so." Byakuya said heavily. "I won't pretend I like the idea of ryoka going through records, but this is a considerably aged document. The people responsible are dead — and besides, if it helps you resolve your duty and helps us to prevent further damage to Soul Society, I don't see that there's much choice."

"Jus' show him, Kira." Renji advised. "The quicker you do that, the quicker it might spark somethin' in his brain about these dreams he's been having."

Kira nodded, pulling out the battered sheet of paper, and smoothing it against the edge of the sofa before handing it to the bemused Uryuu.

"This is the only reference we've found so far to a Captain called Shizuki." He said evenly. "It relates to his weapon — his *zanpakutou*, and it's only by coincidence that I found it. I'm supposed to be finding where it — and other weapons confiscated by Soul Society — are stored… and I happened to notice that a Captain of 10-Bantai was mentioned on the list. Hitsugaya-taichou had never heard of him either… but when Abarai-kun said that what was afflicting you had a connection to a person of the same name, well…"

"The blood that stains us both has been washed away by time." Uryuu muttered absently, taking the paper and glancing at it.

“Huh?”

“If he had his sword taken, surely that means he did something pretty bad?” Uryuu pointed out. “I was just thinking that… hey!”

“You see it too, right?” Ichigo said eagerly. “The kanji that this Shizuki uses to write his given name. It’s Uryuu, isn’t it? Uryuu, like yours.”

“Rain Dragon.” Uryuu whispered, the sheet of paper slipping between his fingers and onto the blanket that covered him as he raised dismayed indigo eyes to Ichigo’s startled brown ones. “That’s what it says. Rain Dragon.”

“Well, yeah, I guess it does…” Ichigo snatched up the paper. “I never thought about your name an’ what it meant before, but that is true. Still..I am right? That is how you write it… ain’t it? I was sure it was, only I’m pretty shit with names.”

“It’s the same.” Uryuu confirmed. “That is how I write my name. Just like that.”

He frowned.

“Though I don’t think it says Uryuu, Kurosaki. I’d forgotten till now, but in one of the dreams I had, that Niji girl called him something else. Something starting with ‘A’”.

“Well, rain could be ‘*ame*’.” Ichigo reflected. “Just because he spells it like you doesn’t mean that it’s read the same way… right? Ameryuu, maybe?”

“No… not that.” Uryuu shook his head. “I think… it might have been… Ametatsu?”

“You didn’t say that before.” Renji observed, and Uryuu looked impatient.

“I can’t remember every detail.” He said crossly. “A lot’s been going on — it didn’t seem particularly important till now.”

“Using the same name kanji seems quite significant to me.” Renji retorted. “No matter how the hell you choose to read it.”

“*Could* it be coincidence?” Kira bit his lip, and Uryuu shook his head.

“I don’t think so.” He said shakily. “I don’t remember attacking 6-Bantai, but… I had another dream. And I still don’t understand it. But in my dream… I was somewhere I didn’t recognise. And there was… there was a dragon. He spoke to me… and he said things… things

about my name, things about sins and blood and… and that I shouldn't be able to see him."

"Dragons?" Renji's eyebrows shot up, and Byakuya frowned, moving across to take the sheet of battered paper from Ichigo's grip.

"A dragon." He murmured. "By any chance, did this dragon happen to mention *his* name?"

"No" Uryuu shook his head. "He said I wasn't ready to hear it, and because of it he couldn't help me. Then he disappeared."

"I see." Byakuya's eyes narrowed, and Ichigo let out an exclamation.

"Shit!" He cried. "Ishida, are you trying to tell me that… you had a conversation with this guy's *zanpakutou*?"

"*Zanpakutou*?" Uryuu frowned. "It was a dragon. Not a sword… Kurosaki, what are you talking about?"

"*Zanpakutou* take different forms, depending on their nature." Kira said gravely, and Renji nodded.

"Zabimaru's a baboon with a snake for a tail." He said frankly. "The first time I saw him, I was hella surprised, let me tell you. But jus' because they look like a sword when like this,"

He tapped the hilt of his weapon. "They're the culmination of a Shinigami's *reiryoku*… every one is unique."

"But…"

"Zangetsu-ossan is a depressing dude with dark glasses." Ichigo added, and Uryuu stared at him.

"You mean… *you've* had one of those dream things… too?"

"Of course, dammit. I wouldn't be able to fight as a Shinigami if I'd never spoken to my *zanpakutou*, would I? Let alone achieve Bankai!"

"Well, I wouldn't know." Uryuu defended himself. "I'm not a Shinigami, so I don't know all these things!"

"Zangetsu didn't tell me his name right away." Ichigo added. "Stands to reason that this dragon o' yours is the same way. Shit, Ishida, you really *are* turning into a Shinigami!"

"What concerns me, however, is the nature of this *zanpakutou*." Before Uryuu could respond to this horrifying suggestion, Byakuya spoke once more. "Quincy, you said that the dragon told you you shouldn't see him? Did he mention why?"

“Because I wasn’t the one who commanded him.” Uryuu nodded. “That whoever that was was dead.”

“Which means it was this Shizuki-taichou’s *zanpakutou* that Ishida-san saw?” Kira asked doubtfully, and Byakuya shook his head.

“Such a thing is not possible.” He said frankly. “Only the Shinigami who summoned the *zanpakutou* should be able to commune with him in that way. You should know that, Kira, considering how long you’ve been in office.”

“Sorry.” Kira looked abashed, and Ichigo frowned.

“So what are you saying, Bya… Kuchiki-taichou?” He asked, only just catching himself in mid-sentence as a dark storm brewed in the nobleman’s grey eyes. “That what Ishida’s sayin’ is impossible?”

“Perhaps.” Byakuya shrugged his shoulders. “For now, there is little more we can do. When Rukia returns, I should like to speak to her. Until then, you are all dismissed from my office — I have other work to attend to.”

He turned back to his desk, and Kira got hurriedly to his feet, casting his former classmate a glance.

“I should be getting back to 3-Bantai to see whether or not anyone else has had any luck.” He said. “But I’ll be interested in anything you find out. Thank you for bringing me into this, Abarai-kun. Kuchiki-taichou.”

He bowed in Byakuya’s direction, then withdrew, and Renji sighed, gesturing to Ichigo and Uryuu to follow him.

“That’s our cue to leave.” He said frankly. “Come on, the both of you. Ishida, you keep whatever’s flittin’ around your head in check a while, though, all right? You scared the shit out of some of our juniors this mornin’ and I don’t want a repeat.”

“If I could control it, I would. I’m more messed up than anyone as it stands.” Uryuu retorted, and Ichigo grinned, hauling him to his feet.

“But if he has the same name kanji as you, there must be a connection. So we’ve found something, and that’s a step forward.” He said optimistically, as the three left the Captain’s office, shutting the door behind them. “Byakuya’s being cooperative, for once, and Rukia’ll probably find stuff out from Ukitake-san.”

“And if Kira’s doing research into something connected to it, we’ll probably hear all we want about that, too.” Renji added.

“This Kira dude is seriously an old schoolfriend of yours, Renji?” Ichigo asked. Renji nodded.

“Yes. Why?”

“He doesn’t seem much like you, is all. He has manners, for a start.”

“I can have manners too, if I want them.” Renji objected. “Besides, Kira’s from some lesser noble family, an’ so he was raised that way. Why? Are you bothered that I brought him into this? With what he was working on, I thought…”

“Not really. If you trust him, I guess we can.” Ichigo shrugged. “Right, Ishida?”

“The quicker it’s resolved, the happier I’ll be.” Uryuu agreed. “Although… 3-Bantai… Abarai-kun, wasn’t one of the Captains who went to Hueco Mundo from 3-Bantai?”

“Yes.” Renji agreed. “Ichimaru.”

“The fox-faced one, right?” Ichigo frowned. “I hadn’t realised — so is it okay, then, if Kira helps us out? I mean, if he’s got a whole squad to deal with too…”

“Yeah. It’s fine. He likes to work.” Renji dismissed it with a flick of his fingers. “Besides, it’s all been a bit shit for 3-Bantai since Ichimaru left. It’s a chance for him to get them back in people’s good books — so it seems logical to me.”

“Well, so long as he’s cool with it, I guess we’ve no reason to complain.” Ichigo grinned. “I guess we are making progress, after all.”

“Yeah.” Uryuu’s thoughts flitted back to his dream-conversation with the dragon, and he sighed. “I just wish we could make it a little more quickly… that’s all.”

“Shizuki?”

Ukitake pulled his robe more firmly around his shoulders, casting his visitor a concerned glance as he seemed to register the tension in her young frame. “Now that’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time. In a very long time, in fact. What makes you ask me about him of all people, Kuchiki? And why now — I don’t understand?”

“It’s complicated.” Rukia settled herself more comfortably on the floor of her captain’s quarters, an apologetic look in her dark eyes. “I’m sorry to bother you, Ukitake-taichou, especially when you’re not feeling well.”

“Of late that’s been nothing unusual, on and off.” Ukitake looked frustrated. “I just think it’s settled and it kicks off again. Too much recent excitement, perhaps. But don’t let it dissuade you from coming to see me. I will always listen to any concerns you have, Kuchiki — no matter what the state of my health.”

“I know that.” Rukia admitted. “And it’s not really a ‘concern’ of mine, exactly. It’s just… since this was something from two hundred years ago, I thought… you might well remember something about it.”

“About it.” Ukitake rubbed his chin, a thoughtful look entering his brown eyes as he regarded her. “And by *it* you mean…?”

“The… the massacre of the Quincy, I suppose, sir. In the Real World, two hundred years ago.”

“Mm.” Ukitake pursed his lips. “Yes, I thought that might be what you meant. Though it’s a long finished matter, you know. The whole business was laid to rest before you were even here — before your brother was even old enough to wear the *haori*, for that matter. I didn’t think I’d ever hear anyone mention the name Shizuki again, to be truthful — how did you come by it in the first place?

“As I said, it’s sort of complicated.” Rukia owned. “It has something to do with the Real World — actually, most precisely, to do with Ishida. And what happened when they all came to Soul Society to… well… help me out.”

She pinkened slightly.

“Because of that, I guess, I feel this is part-way my fault.” She added.

Ukitake’s face cleared.

“So this is part of Ichigo-kun’s reason for coming to Soul Society, then?” He asked. “I remember the Sou Taichou saying that you were to keep an eye on his activities — but I didn’t realise it would involve delving into ancient history.”

“Nor did I, but at least it’s something to do.” Rukia sighed. “But it’s strange. We can’t find anything out about this Shizuki-taichou — or that he even existed. It’s like he never did.”

“I can assure you that he existed.” Ukitake said softly. “Although I cannot say I’m surprised that you’ve found little information about him. Few would remember him as a person — even fewer would probably speak about him, even if they did know.”

Rukia’s eyes narrowed, taking in the sudden clouding of her

Captain's dark brown eyes.

"Taichou, Shizuki-taichou is… is dead, isn't he?"

"Yes." Ukitake looked surprised. "And has been a long time. Captains don't generally leave office unless they gain a promotion or pass on, after all. You know that, I think?"

"Yes, from Nii-sama." Rukia agreed. "But… I suppose what I mean is, Captains like… like Ginrei-jiisama are still talked about, and held in high esteem. But… I didn't know that Urahara had been a Captain at all till recently, and I know he was exiled because he did something wrong."

"I think there's probably far more to Urahara's case than we ever got to hear." Ukitake said frankly. "But I'm not sure I follow."

Rukia paused, then,

"What happened to Shizuki-taichou, when he died?"

"What happened to him?" Ukitake stared at her blankly. "Kuchiki, you're going to have to spell this out for me more clearly. I don't understand what you're trying to discover from me, and I can't answer you if you don't ask me the right questions. Tell me straight out what it is you seek to know, and I'll do my best to respond — if it's within my power to do so. But all this random darting from subject to subject is only confusing me further."

Rukia bit her lip, gathering her thoughts as she debated how best to raise the subject. Long dead or otherwise, Shizuki had once been a Captain level Shinigami, after all — Ukitake's equal, and her distinct superior in every way. Yet even so, it gave her an uneasy feeling. There was something at odds with the whole picture, she reflected. If he had been such a respected captain, why was it that his name had been so little mentioned?

She sighed.

"Ukitake-taichou, forgive me if this is a rude thing to ask about a former Captain." She said slowly. "But… er… did he do something… bad? Did he… maybe… do something like Aizen-taichou and… and the others, and that's why he… isn't really talked about any more?"

Ukitake's expression became grave.

"I wouldn't compare him to Aizen and the other recent renegades." He said softly. "But yes, you could say that he crossed swords with Soul Society in a way that was not forgiven."

“You sound like you think he should have been.” Rukia realised, and there was a long silence, as the Captain hesitated, apparently working out the best way to respond. Then, at length, he shrugged an expression of troubled resignation in his dark eyes.

“No… in the circumstances, it was probably the only thing to be done.” He said heavily, reticence in his tones as though by saying such a thing he was betraying something or someone that Rukia could not quite fathom. “Though I don’t pretend I liked it, it was an unavoidable outcome. But you would understand, I think, the way that Shizuki’s mind was working, in the time leading up to his death. Grief affects people, after all. It affects them irreversibly.”

“Grief?”

A faint image of Shiba Kaien’s grinning face flashed across Rukia’s thoughts, and she frowned. “Taichou, are you saying that Shizuki-taichou… lost someone?”

“I don’t know all the particulars, since I wasn’t present when the events took place.” Ukitake said sadly. “My health meant that I wasn’t able to play a part in the discussions with the Quincy, although I would have liked to have done so. It seemed a good premise to make peace between two spiritually gifted groups of people, after all — well, your young friends Kurosaki and Ishida seem to have overcome that boundary where we failed, so perhaps it has all worked out in the end. But you know that, two centuries ago, all negotiations between the Shinigami and the Quincy broke down completely. There were… situations. And in the end, special forces were dispatched from Soul Society to kill the renegades who insisted on defying us. It wasn’t a choice anyone wanted to make — but for the sake of the world’s balance, it was one we had to make.”

He got slowly to his feet, padding across the chamber to his desk and flipping open the lid.

“The order came from Central 46 and the decision was conveyed to us all via Genryuusai-sensei — Yamamoto Sou Taichou.” He added. “It was subsequently passed down through our channels to the Shinigami in the Real World, in order to let them know of our plans. Their instructions were simple. Any Quincy willing to submit to our conditions was to be spared, on the understanding they would be forever under our observation in order that an imbalance could not occur again. And any who refused would be slain… unequivocally and without mercy.”

He sighed, resting his hands on the hard wood surface.

“At that time, your brother’s predecessor Ginrei was one of the Captains stationed in the Real World.” He added. “He and the then captain of 2-Bantai, Shihouin Hirohito, along with Shizuki had been heavily involved in trying to reach a settlement. What happened next is… open to debate.”

He frowned, and Rukia could see weariness in his dark eyes.

“Central 46 found that there had been a breakdown in communication and that Shihouin Hirohito was in no way at fault for his decisions.” He said heavily. “That due to some unseen circumstance, only the execution order was fully handed down. The Shihouin-ke put great pressure on people to obtain that verdict — and they succeeded. In the end, I suppose it didn’t matter who was to blame. The result was that many Quincy who might have become allies were slain by the Special Operation Forces before the communication troubles were cleared up and the true message made known.”

He turned to face his young companion, leaning back against the desk as he remembered.

“Shizuki was a young man, unlike his companions, and as a Captain it was his first mission of that nature.” He added. “It had happened at the last minute, when circumstances had prevented a more experienced man from taking the role. He wholeheartedly believed in finding common ground between the Quincy and the Shinigami. According to your Grandfather’s report following the incident, he also lost his heart to one of their young women — a girl by the name of…”

“Niji.” Rukia breathed, and Ukitake’s eyes widened as he nodded his head.

“Yes.” He agreed. “Niji. Ishida Niji.”

“*Ishida* Niji?” Rukia looked floored. “This girl… was one of Ishida’s ancestors?”

“Perhaps, though I’ve heard that Ishida is not an uncommon name in the Real World.” Ukitake shrugged his shoulders.

He paused, then pulled a battered, dog-eared document from the desk drawer, smoothing the cover and then holding it out to her.

“This is the report your Grandfather submitted to Genryuusai-sensei after the events took place.” He added. “All the Captains present at that hearing were given a copy. Most destroyed them after the final hearing into Shizuki’s actions — after all, it was a posthumous investigation in the end… by that time he was already dead. Ginrei’s

account was thorough, but politically correct — he did not allow any personal opinions to slip into anything he wrote, so in places it's somewhat opaque. Still, it's as full a report as has ever existed into what happened when the Quincy were slaughtered. Including Shizuki's crime that Central 46 decided could not be forgiven."

"He was executed before he was tried?" Rukia paled, remembering her own close shave with the Soukyoku and Ukitake sighed, seemingly guessing her thoughts.

"It wasn't so simple as that." He said heavily. "Shizuki's death was a direct result of his actions. It wasn't an execution exactly. But the findings would have still probably have condemned him, even if matters hadn't gone that way."

He shrugged.

"In any case, I kept my copy of the report." He added. "I'm afraid I'm of the opinion that past mistakes can always be learnt from, so long as the knowledge of them remains for them to be learnt from."

He smiled.

"You might also want to ask your brother to check the archives." He added. "There may be more data there."

"Ichigo and I already did, but there didn't seem to be much we could access without all kinds of override codes." Rukia sighed. "That's what made me wonder about what Shizuki-taichou must have done. They were codes that Niisama has, but without Yamamoto Sou Taichou's consent he can't unlock those resources and let people without rank see them. And Niisama believes in protocol, so he suggested I came and spoke to you."

"I see." Ukitake looked rueful. "Your brother feels that maybe I don't believe in protocol?"

"I don't think he meant that!" Rukia said hurriedly. "He just said that you'd remember the incident when it happened, and there's no lockdown on people's memories. Something like that. In any case, I decided to follow his advice."

"If Byakuya's involved in this, then there must be a just cause behind it. He doesn't become involved in things lightly." Ukitake observed. "Well? You're welcome to both my memories and the report — noone's ever told me that it should not be showed to unranked Shinigami, after all, and you are a member of my squad asking for information I see no reason not to give. Though I will warn you that my opinions may well be subject to bias. And also, I'd like to know

your full motivation, if you don't mind. As subordinate to Captain — if you please. What exactly are you and the Kurosaki boy trying to achieve?"

Rukia looked troubled.

"It sounds crazy, but we think that Shizuki-taichou is… currently inhabiting Ishida's body." She said hesitantly. "And we wanted to know what we were dealing with."

"Inhabiting?" Ukitake's eyes widened once more. "Surely such a thing is impossible!"

"It's the only explanation we have." Rukia said softly. "Recently he's been hallucinating, having blackouts and acting unlike himself — to the point of summoning Kidou spells and firing them in the middle of Karakura. He's also had dreams — about the massacre of the Quincy, and a guy called Shizuki and a girl called Niji. It might be impossible, Taichou. But it seems like it's true."

Ukitake's brows drew together in consternation, and for a brief moment Rukia thought she saw a flicker of alarm dart across her superior's dark brown eyes.

"I have never heard of such a thing before." He admitted. "But… if it is so… Kuchiki, you must be very careful. If Shizuki's spirit really has been merged with Ishida's own…"

"What did Shizuki-taichou do exactly, sir?" Rukia asked hesitantly, and Ukitake's frown deepened, preoccupation in his gaze as though an unwelcome memory had suddenly rent through his thoughts.

"When the young woman died, he lost his reason." He said softly, and from the way he said it, Rukia had the impression that he was relating something both deeply unpleasant and personally painful. "He really was attached to her, so it seems, and the situation was made worse by the fact that she — along with the rest of her clan — were innocents. They had cooperated fully with the negotiations, and Ginrei was quite clear when he gave his evidence — that they should not have been slain by the execution order. He went to some lengths to ensure that their souls were not confined or treated with any particular negativity as a result of Soul Society's mistake — but then that was the Captain your Grandfather was. He was always rational and fair, and even though he considered the Quincy a problem, he did his best to smooth the situation down. Thanks to that, I suppose, the Quincy who did survive did not wind up revolting against Soul Society. In fact, many of them submitted their bows of their own accord — and those who did not consented to be under Soul Society's

observation. Without Ginrei's quick interference, they would probably have *all* been tracked down and slain by the Special Forces."

"And Shizuki-taichou?"

"Yes. Shizuki." Once more, Ukitake looked sad. "When he discovered the orders that Central 46 had decreed, and that Shihouin Hirohito had acted outside of his remit — as he saw it — he declared himself vengeance and went on a rampage. According to what Ginrei told me — and what Shizuki told me himself, when he returned here — he set out to down as many Special Forces Shinigami as he could who had been involved in the Quincy massacre. Central 46 had confirmed the unlocking of full Captain power in order to carry out their orders regarding the Quincy, and Shizuki made full use of that fact. He showed none of them any mercy — I believe he killed a good two thirds of them before turning his attention on their Captain."

He sighed heavily.

"By rights, Shihouin was a Captain with much more experience, and he should have won the confrontation easily." He said softly. "But Shizuki was a Rukongai boy who had grown up in one of the roughest places and who had learnt how to fight almost as soon as he'd learnt anything else. He was also reckless enough to push and push until he had the upper hand. I'm told that it was… not a pleasant scene. Unfortunately, Ginrei happened on it a little too late — he was not able to save Shihouin's life, or apprehend Shizuki before he returned to Soul Society."

Rukia's eyes widened, and Ukitake nodded.

"Shizuki came back before the Gate could be locked to keep him out, and burned his *haori*. He murmured." He came here — bloodsoaked and hysterical, and I tried to talk sense into him. But it was beyond doing — and he left here with one aim in his mind. He tried to assassinate Genryuusai-sensei in his madness, and was easily defeated. His spirit particles were scattered into the ether and the matter was at an end."

"He… killed people?" Rukia blanched. "Lots of people? Including… one of Yoruichi-san's family?"

"A predecessor, yes." Ukitake agreed. "Ginrei's report does not ascribe blame — but I know that he and I both felt that Shihouin's high-handedness in judging all the Quincy the same was largely at fault. But even so, Shizuki's behaviour was still vastly out of line. He couldn't be reasoned with, either. I really tried, Kuchiki, but I couldn't break through his resolution. But it was grief that drove him, and he'd

already gone too far to see any kind of way out."

He paused, sending her an unreadable look, then,

"It… it drove him insane, I think, in the end." He murmured softly. "By the time he got back here, any rationality had broken down. Releasing that much power, and feeling so much emotion all at once — it cracked his sanity beyond repair."

He shrugged.

"I have no idea what became of Ishida Niji, but I do know she wound up well beyond Shizuki's reach."

Rukia looked grave.

"In the Real World, when Ishida was acting strangely, he called Inoue 'Niji'." She remembered. "I guess he thought maybe he'd finally found her."

"Perhaps that's what brought him out in the first place." Ukitake suggested. "Where is Ishida-kun now?"

"6-Bantai, with Renji and Ichigo." Rukia replied. "Shizuki-taichou — if it *is* Shizuki-taichou — doesn't seem to like Ichigo much, but at the moment Ishida seems to be in control, so I think it's all right. And Inoue will be here, too — as soon as Urahara's able to make the arrangements for her to cross over to Soul Society. Whatever it is inside Ishida, Ichigo said that he seems to be calmer around her, so that'll help too… if he really does believe she's Niji."

"I think the best thing is for him to be here." Ukitake settled himself down on his cushions once more. "Where we can properly investigate and where he can't do damage to the innocent people in the Real World."

He paused, then nodded.

"And Inoue-san too." He added. "If it's the case that she can reason with him. Ishida-kun's predicament is something caused in Soul Society, and should be resolved here. I'll make contact with Urahara and see about speeding up the arrangements for a suitable gateway to the Real World, Kuchiki. Inoue-san can join us here — and we'll see how things go from there."

He coughed, then,

"Tomorrow I will make a trip to the archive myself, no matter what health I am in." He added, his voice somewhat hoarse. "And if Byakuya is also investigating, hopefully he'll also back me up. I'm glad

you brought it to my attention, Kuchiki, even if you only sought my advice… I don't think that it's something I should sit back and ignore, so you may count on my help too, so far as I can give it. This may well become a matter we all need to deal with, after all — the sins of Soul Society's past once again."

"And the sins of Shizuki-taichou." Rukia said softly. "Thank you, Taichou."

"You're welcome." Ukitake assured her.

"Taichou, can I ask you… did you know Shizuki-taichou well? I mean, it sounds… sort of like you did. Once."

"Ah." Ukitake's expression became clouded once more and he nodded his head. "You realised that, did you? Yes. I suppose I did, in a manner of speaking. When he became a Captain, I was the one who put his name forward. Though in truth he had no shortage of supporters. He was a very promising young candidate… a very talented young man with real hope for a long and successful career."

A nostalgic look touched his expression.

"As I said, he was a Rukongai kid, like you and Abarai." He added. "And he'd worked hard to get to where he was, so he never took it for granted. He was always someone to rely on, so far as I remember. Noone could have imagined he could have lost himself so much as he did — but then love is a tricky thing, and a love that crosses boundaries…"

He trailed off, and Rukia frowned.

"I see." She murmured, her thoughts drifting to Byakuya and his long dead wife. "It seems like crossing boundaries causes problems of all kinds, no matter who's involved. But I can understand how he must've felt, coming into this all from the fringes of Rukongai. It was a big achievement for him to be recommended as a Captain."

"It was, but not undeserved." Ukitake smiled, yet there was something uncharacteristically sad in his usual genial smile. "Like your young friend Abarai, he had tremendous natural ability even despite his age and his origins. And I have every faith that Abarai will also get his recommendation as Captain one day, too — it's not an impossible transition to make."

"I asked Renji the other day if he wanted to be a Captain and he said not yet… he wanted to be stronger." Rukia remembered. "But it had occured to me too, that maybe he'd wind up wearing a *haori* at some time in the future."

“Something of a victory for Inazuri, if it happens.” Ukitake reflected. “I don’t rightly remember which district Shizuki came from. I don’t think it was yours, Rukia, but it wasn’t one of the higher ranking ones. He was determined, though, just like Abarai. Now I think of it, there are definite similarities between the two of them.”

“I hope not too many.” Rukia shivered. “I don’t think Renji would go crazy and kill people because someone he cared about was dead.”

Ukitake’s expression became pensive.

“I think recent events have indicated exactly the kind of way Abarai would have reacted to protect someone he cared about.” He said sensibly. “But that doesn’t mean he would do something like Shizuki did. The fact that he wants to wait and gain more strength before accepting the *haori* suggests to me he’s learnt plenty from Aizen’s betrayal and he’s not looking to rush into anything. I don’t think you need to worry about your friend, Rukia. I suspect he’s a far too street-smart young man to fall into that trap. And besides, he has one of the best Captains to learn restraint from.”

He smiled wistfully.

“Shizuki was naive and idealistic in other ways.” He added. “He was a great people person and a negotiator, but he took principles and he took them to heart. It should have been a strength in negotiating, which is why he was sent to the Real World. But it proved a weakness, which we discovered too late. I know that Ginrei tried often to dissuade the boy from his romance, but without any success.”

“Well, Renji’s definitely not diplomatic or romantically inclined.” Rukia looked amused, despite herself. “So I guess it probably is okay, even now he has Bankai.”

She tilted her head on one side, eying Ukitake thoughtfully.

“Why did you recommend him to be Captain, sir? If you don’t mind — I’d like to know as much about him as I can, because it’s all we have to go on.”

“Didn’t I mention that?” Ukitake looked surprised. “Shizuki served as my Vice Captain for some years before he got his elevation.”

“Your… Vice Captain?” Rukia stared. “Before Kaien-dono?”

“Yes.” Ukitake agreed. ‘Oh, it didn’t go quite like that,’ As Rukia looked troubled. “I mean, Kaien didn’t become my Vice Captain immediately Shizuki left the squad. But it had been his choice to serve in 13-Bantai after he graduated from the Institute. In fact, he was

reluctant to leave it even to become Captain of 10-Bantai, though he knew it was the right thing for him to do. He wanted to train in this squad specifically, because he knew that my *zanpakutou*, Sougyo no Kotowari was somewhat water-based — elemental, if you like, in its attacks. So, it turned out, was his."

"And so was Kaien-dono's." Rukia whispered. "I see."

"Precisely." Ukitake nodded. "You can see the logic in his decision, and he was an obvious candidate to make Vice Captain. The squad respected him. Most of the other squads did, too."

"Yes." Rukia pursed her lips. "So he had a water type *zanpakutou*?"

"Not precisely." Ukitake shook his head. "Hassuiryou, if I remember right — well, it may be in Ginrei's report, so read it and make sure I haven't misrecalled the details. Mind you, I trained him enough, I'm sure I wouldn't forget that easily…"

"Hassuiryou." Rukia's brows drew together as she considered this. "Eight… water…"

"Dragons." Ukitake responded. "Hassuiryou controlled water in the form of rain, and manipulated it in several different ways."

"A rain dragon." Rukia murmured. "Why is that… something about that… is bothering me and I don't know what."

"Maybe it's his name." Ukitake suggested, reaching across to touch the cover of the report. "*Zanpakutou* come from within a Shinigami's soul, and Shizuki's given name, Ametatsu, was spelt with the characters for rain and dragon. That's probably what you're thinking of… Kuchiki?"

For Rukia's eyes had widened, staring down at the file in disbelief.

"Rain and dragon." She whispered. "But… Ame… tatsu? Taichou, this is how… Shizuki-taichou wrote his name?"

"Yes." Ukitake looked foxed. "What about it?"

"It's the same way Ishida spells his, that's all." Rukia got hurriedly to her feet. "Rain and dragon. Uryuu. Ametatsu. That's too close to be a coincidence. First Ishida Niji, and now this…"

Ukitake's expression became startled.

"Ishida Uryuu spells his name in the same way Shizuki spelt his?" He asked, and Rukia nodded.

"I need to take this back to the others and tell them what you've

said." She responded. "Thank you, Taichou. I think… with your help, we might be finding out more and more about this guy, after all."

Author's Note:

*So what do people think, then, of Shizuki's zanpakutou? I'm curious to hear — please don't be too brutal! Though of course I haven't written anything about what it can do yet — but even so, I hope people will like how things are going on that front :) I have thought about it very carefully since beginning this story, to make it a proper fit…^_^*

I also don't know if Ichigo and company met Kira or didn't before they left SS but my hunch is they didn't — since Kira had plenty of his own issues to be dealing with and spent much of the time either locked in a cell or playing parts in Ichimaru's circus routine. After he realised Hinamori was hurt, Kira was one of the few Shinigami which didn't go to Soukyoku Hill… so there's no reason to suppose that he and Ichigo/Ishida/etc ever did meet face to face up until this point. In fact, I don't know that I've ever seen Ichigo and Kira exchange words except in filler anime sections…

***Thank you again**, by the way, for all the support last chapter. I'm sorry if I scared people! When I lose a chapter of a story it's a big deal to me — especially one which I'd worked pretty hard on getting right the first time around. But I won't give up — I'll fix it and the story will go on.*

Cookies all round :)

Chapter Sixteen: High Stakes

Chapter Sixteen: High Stakes

"So what did Ukitake-taichou have to say, then, about all of this?"

As Rukia slipped back inside 6-Bantai, she found Renji waiting for her, a quizzical look on his tattooed face. "You were a hell of a time, Rukia — I half wondered if you were gonna stop the night there."

"He did ask me if I wanted to, but I figured I ought to come back and report something this evening." Rukia said with a sigh, holding up the bound booklet that the Captain had given her. "Because he gave me this — and he told me quite a few things. Where are Ichigo and Ishida? Are they already asleep?"

"Ishida is." Renji nodded. "This morning we had an episode, and he kicked off pretty badly. I wound up drawing Zabimaru on him, and Taichou had to intervene in the end to prevent him blowing up large areas of the squad headquarters."

"For real?" Rukia looked startled, and Renji nodded.

"He looked pretty grey when the Taichou took him down, so I guess his body's not used to what whatever it is has been making him do." He agreed. "Anyhow, I figured we'd leave him an' he could sleep it off. I'm ready, now, if he happens to go crazy on us again. I about remember binding spells, and I figure I can use one, if need be."

"Or if not, I can." Rukia said absently, and Renji bristled indignantly.

"Are you telling me that you don't have any confidence in my Kidou skill?" He demanded, a wounded expression crossing his face.

"Not really." Rukia told him frankly, and Renji snorted, folding his arms across his chest.

"This from a girl who didn't even get to graduation." He muttered. "So it's never been my strongest art — who cares about that? I know enough to take down someone who's under some kind of hypnosis or spell an' that's all that matters. I'm a friggin' Vice Captain, dammit! At least give me some credit — do you think I'd have been given that role if I couldn't at least fire my spells off straight?"

"I suppose not." Rukia relented. "If Ishida's asleep, what about

Ichigo? He should hear what I have to say, too."

"Watchin' over him, just in case somethin' does kick off." Renji responded, leading the way down the hall towards the chamber which acted as the boys' temporary bedroom. "He seemed t'think it was his responsibility, an' t'be honest, I was more'n happy to leave him to it. I've had enough work piled on me by the Taichou already, plus now there's all of this."

"Nii-sama isn't here either, then?"

"He's gone to the archives in search of something." Renji shrugged. "I think… whatever this is has got to him, too. At least, when Ginrei-sama's name came into it, he suddenly started to get interested in finding out what was going on. Either that or he took exception to the squad buildings being fired — one or the other."

"Either's a possibility." Rukia pursed her lips. "In any case, this report Ukitake-taichou had in his desk was written by Ginrei-jiisama after the events when the Quincy were cut down. Taichou said it was objective and distant from the events in question, so in places… well, he called it 'opaque', which I guess means there were things Ginrei-jiisama thought but was too prudent to put in print. Listen, Renji,"

As they reached the door of the back chamber,

"I think it's better if Ishida is asleep when we talk about this. At least, for now. There are things Ukitake-taichou said… let's just say that it might be safer for all of us this way."

"Well, whatever." Renji shrugged. "Taichou's not dead keen on things being discussed too heavily, in any case. I don't know if he was happy I brought Kira back this afternoon, t'be honest… I guess the tighter we keep things the better."

"Kira-fukutaichou?" Rukia looked surprised, her hand hovering over the release for the door catch, and Renji nodded.

"Hitsugaya-taichou assigned him to find some missing weaponry that were stashed in a vault somewhere in Central 46 a long time ago." He agreed. "Apparently they've vanished and Aizen's hand is suspected… so anyhow, it's ended up as 3-Bantai's job to find them. Since this Shizuki guy's weapon is one of the swords listed in the information Kira has, it seemed wise to bring him into this. To cut a long story short, basically, Ginrei-sama was once involved in the protection of the vault — until the key disappeared on 5-Bantai's watch."

"Into Aizen's hands?" Rukia's eyes narrowed, and Renji nodded.

“That’s the theory of choice.” He replied.

“But…”

Rukia faltered, debating how to word her next question, and Renji eyed her quizzically.

“What’s biting you?” He demanded. “Are we going to talk to Ichigo or not…?”

“In a moment.” Rukia nodded. “Just… Renji, are you sure it’s all right, for Kira-fukutaichou to be involved in all of this?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Renji looked surprised. “I would’ve thought the more minds on it the better, and Kira’s pretty damn smart most of the time. You must remember that. He was the one who got the highest grade on the entrance tests for our year, remember?”

“I hadn’t forgotten.” Rukia shook her head. “But… I also haven’t forgotten that he was Ichimaru Gin’s right hand man. Renji…”

“That ain’t nothing to do with it.” Renji shook his head, a sober look touching his eyes. “Listen, you ain’t to talk about that. A lot happened — we all did crazy things. Leave it alone, all right? Kira made mistakes — hell, maybe we all did at times. Dwellin’ on them ain’t the thing to do now.”

Rukia bit her lip, and Renji sighed.

“I know you hated Ichimaru, an’ you had good reason in the end.” He said quietly. “But listen to me. I *know* Kira. I know that he’s the one who blames himself more’n anyone else ever will for what he did or didn’t see or do during his time followin’ Ichimaru. I figure that Hitsugaya-taichou gave him this to do because he needed something to do… seriously, Rukia, let it go. Kira’s beaten himself up inside already. He don’t need anyone else beating him up over it. Even the Sou Taichou’s dropped it — promise me you’ll do the same.”

Rukia glanced at the floor for a moment, then, slowly, she nodded.

“You know him better than me, in the end.” She said with a heavy sigh. “All right. It’s hard not to equate him in my mind with Ichimaru, because he was always there, in his shadow, doing his bidding. And it had occured to me that he was involved in the treason, too. But I guess… if you trust him, I’ll try to, too. If you think he’s on the right side… I’ll try to do so too.”

“You almost got killed by those idiots, an’ I get how you feel.” Renji said frankly. “But Kira’s already got Hinamori’s injuries on his conscience — even if they shouldn’t be there. He thinks far too hard

about shit, an' he does stupid things from time to time. That's all. He's never wanted to hurt you — or been involved in Ichimaru's darker schemes. At worst he was a puppet who didn't know which orders to obey an' which not to. That's all."

"Then I'll let it go." Rukia said slowly. "I won't mention Ichimaru when he's around."

"So let's go talk to Ichigo." Renji gestured to the door, and Rukia nodded, sliding it back.

"Shit, what the hell time do you think this is?" Ichigo glanced up from his squatted position in the corner of the room, casting Rukia an irritated glance as she and her companion entered. "We expected you back ages ago — what did you do, get a lecture or something?"

"No… but a lot of information." Rukia ignored her friend's ire, dropping down in between the sleeping Uryuu's futon and Ichigo's still rolled up one and after a moment, Renji followed suit. "Ukitake-taichou does remember Shizuki. Very, very clearly indeed."

"Which means we know he at least exists." Renji reflected. Rukia nodded, her expression shadowed, and she set the report down on the boards between them.

"I was so long because after we finished speaking, I wanted to skim over some of this." She said quietly. "It's a report into what happened when the Quincy were killed. It was written by Ginrei-jiisama — Nii-sama's predecessor — after the event. Ukitake-taichou said most copies were destroyed, but he chose to keep his."

"Good thing for us he did." Ichigo reached over to scoop it up, flicking through the pages. "Shiit, that's some heavy duty language right there."

"Ginrei-sama was the head of the Kuchiki-ke." Renji reminded him. "Are you surprised?"

"Having spoken to Byakuya, no." Ichigo dropped the book back down. "Rukia, you've read it — what's the summary?"

"Shizuki Ametatsu's been erased from Soul Society history because he committed a crime that couldn't be forgiven." Rukia said frankly.

"We know that. If he's on Kira's list of confiscated weapons, we figured he must've done something bad." Renji pointed out, and Rukia nodded.

"It's all to do with the Quincy uprising, and their execution." She responded. "In short… I guess there isn't an easy way to say it. He fell

in love with a Quincy girl, and she got killed. So he decided to take his revenge… and he slaughtered his way through the Special Operations representatives in the Real World before taking down Shihouin Hirohito — the 2-Bantai captain. Apparently… it was quite a gruesome scene."

"What the…?" Ichigo's eyes almost fell out of his head, and he cast the oblivious Uryuu an apprehensive look. "Someone like that… is inside Ishida's body?"

"Well, that'd explain earlier. He was pretty crazy then." Renji said frankly. "Well? So that's the deal, huh? This guy lost his girl, lost his mind and went on a killing spree. Then… what? His crimes caught up with him?"

"He came back to Soul Society." Rukia frowned. "Ukitake-taichou said he tried to kill the Sou Taichou and was cut down."

"He must've been really out of his mind, then." Ichigo murmured. "I can't imagine anyone in their right mind choosin' to take on that dude."

"No kidding." Renji shook his head. "Even the most experienced of the other Captains'd have to think twice before fightin' a battle like that. Yamamoto Sou Taichou is legend. End of story."

"Well, at least we have some idea what we're up against, now." Ichigo sighed. "Shit, though. What the hell are we going to do about it, if Ishida really is possessed by a homicidal maniac?"

"For the time being, what can we do?" Rukia looked helpless. "It's information, but it doesn't tell us why Ishida's suddenly having memories and stuff from that time."

"Rukia thinks it's better we don't tell him half of this." Renji added. "Because it might screw him up pretty bad, if he knew. An' she's probably right. I mean, if this guy was nuts enough to go up against the Sou Taichou, who knows what he might make Ishida do if too many more of these memories an' shit seep out? The less he knows the better — we don't want to trigger somethin' we shouldn't."

"And if Kira finds that vault, we need to make sure that Ishida's nowhere nearby at the time." Ichigo said blackly.

"Do you think Ishida would be able to use that *zanpakutou*?" Renji frowned. "It shouldn't work like that. The sword's real owner is dead, after all."

"But if it is Shizuki's ghost inside of Ishida, then maybe he could."

Rukia bit her lip. “We can’t rule it out. He hasn’t used anything but Kidou yet, but…”

“Plus, Ishida did speak to the sword already.” Ichigo added. “Didn’t he?”

“He what?” Rukia stared, and Renji sighed, filling her in on the afternoon’s discussion.

“So that’s what we think it was.” He concluded. “Though the how and why of it is still beyond me. An’ Taichou is still stubbornly stickin’ to the idea that it’s not possible for a dead Shinigami to possess a living human. So that’s where we stand.”

“Maybe we should talk to Ukitake-taichou some more.” Ichigo mused, but Rukia shook her head.

“He already said he’d try and hurry up the alterations on the Gate, for Inoue to come through… and that he’d do some research of his own on our behalf, if he could.” She said. “But I don’t want to ask him any more. Not at the moment, after all.”

“Kira said he didn’t look too hot in the Captain’s meeting he was summoned to the other day.” Renji remembered. “I guess if it’s like that, we oughtn’t bug him too much more.”

“Did I miss something?” Ichigo looked confused, and Rukia sighed.

“Ukitake-taichou’s health isn’t as stable as it could be, that’s all.” She said simply. “And I feel bad, bothering him when he’s sick in bed.”

“Really?” Ichigo was surprised. “But he’s been around practically forever, hasn’t he? An’ I never got the impression he was weak or anything — I mean, he released that seal, didn’t he, to pull back Soukyoku? An’ he faced off with the Sou Taichou dude an’ survived… are you seriously telling me that dude’s some kind of invalid?”

“No…” Rukia shook her head. “It’s not like that. He’s not weak… not at all.”

“Ukitake-taichou’s known as being one of the strongest and most experienced Captains in Soul Society.” Renji added. “He’s got a lot of clout, and people respect him because he’s always honest and fair in what he does. S’why Taichou dumped Rukia on him in the first place, if you ask me — because he’s got all the right qualities to babysit a brat like her.”

“Shut up.” Rukia glared at him. “I wasn’t dumped on anyone. Ukitake-taichou wanted me in his squad. He’s said so several times…

so take that and suck on it, Abarai Renji!”

“I still bet he was sweet-talked by the Taichou.” Renji poked out his tongue at her, folding his arms across his chest. “He’s soft-hearted, sometimes — of course he’d take you in.”

“Quit it, both of you, or you’ll wake Ishida.” Ichigo said impatiently. “So he’s not some weakling then? Just the way you were talking…”

“Ukitake-taichou has some disease that makes him cough.” Renji turned his attention back to his companion. “I don’t know much about it, but sometimes he has attacks an’ it lays him low. That’s all.”

“Tuberculosis.” Rukia said softly, and Ichigo blinked.

“Souls can get diseases like that, too?”

“Guess they can, because he did… somehow.” Renji shrugged. “In any case, if he’s not well at the moment, we can’t go barge in there an’ interrogate him more.”

“No, we can’t.” Rukia shook her head. “Besides, I think he gave me pretty much all he knew. He didn’t seem like he was holding anything back.”

She smiled sadly.

“He knew Shizuki pretty well, though.” She added. “Apparently he was once in my squad — Vice Captain, even, before he was recommended to 10-Bantai’s captaincy. And Ukitake-taichou was the one who made that recommendation.”

“Yet he turned out psycho in the end.” Ichigo pursed his lips, and Renji shrugged.

“I guess losing his woman really destroyed him.” He murmured, meeting Rukia’s gaze for a brief second. “An’ he lost his reason an’ just did what his heart told him t’do.”

“There was one other thing Ukitake-taichou said, too.” Rukia remembered. “That this Shihouin took Central 46’s extermination order to mean that all Quincy should be killed, not just the rebelling ones, and there was some dispute about whether or not it was the truth. He said that the courts found it to be a breakdown in communication, and that the Shihouin-ke put a lot of pressure on to make sure it was found that way.”

“So Shihouin did something shit as well, then?” Ichigo asked. “Would explain something, at least.”

“Mm?” Renji cast him a questioning look, and Ichigo spread his hands.

“Yoruichi-san said one of her ancestors had died in strange circs, an’ I guess this is him.” He responded. “An’ that the official records she saw said he’d been killed by Quincy — but that this Ginrei guy’s report mentioned him bein’ in charge of carryin’ out the Quincy execution order. So the two things didn’t marry up. But that was all she knew about it, an’ that she had never really cared much about it either way.”

“The Shihouin had a lot of power, back then.” Rukia murmured. “I guess if he did do something out of order, they’d have the strength to hush it up. Whereas Shizuki was a Shinigami from Rukongai. And he only had Ukitake-taichou to speak for him. Worse, Ukitake-taichou was sick at that time, too… I think he felt he should’ve somehow done more, though God knows what he could’ve done.”

“An’ if this Niji girl was the chick Shizuki was in love with, it sort of explains Ishida’s behaviour in Karakura.” Ichigo reflected. “When he thought Inoue was Niji. Bits are startin’ to make more sense, at least.”

“Well, right now we gotta find a way to purge it out of him before it makes too much more sense.” Renji got to his feet. “Preferably before he has too many more blackouts an’ dreams an’ starts goin’ on a proper rampage through Soul Society.”

The stars were bright in the Soul Society sky as Ukitake tied the white sash of his *hakama* firmly around his waist, pulling the *haori* from its peg and slipping it over his shoulders. A faint breeze drifted in through the open window, sending a shiver through his body, and he frowned, glancing briefly at his reflection in the mirror as he did so.

Fever or no fever, this was not a matter that could wait.

He scooped his *zanpakutou* up from its position beside his desk, sliding it into its normal place at his side.

Shizuki Ametatsu.

Even hearing the name had sparked a lot of memories, not all of them happy ones. He had, he mused wistfully, always taken pride in his adjutants. But he had also, on occasion, paid a high price for investing so much of his time and hope in them. Men like Shizuki, men like Kaien — men whose lives had been cut short far too soon.

And yet here I still am, an old, sick, fool… watching them die because I'm not able to protect them when a Captain should.

He sighed, stifling the urge to cough as he made his way towards the door of his chamber, pausing for a moment as he reached out his senses for any sign of Kiyone or Sentarou's reiatsu hovering anywhere in the local area. They were twice as attentive to him when he was not one hundred percent, and he knew that even if he concealed his reiatsu from prying senses, they had an uncanny way of still showing up when he least expected it.

Kyouraku had always laughed about it, saying that it was down to the loyalty he inspired in his followers. But Ukitake knew only too well that that devoted loyalty was a double-edged sword, and sometimes it worried him how keen they both were to throw themselves into dangerous situations simply to be available at their Captain's side.

Still, this was just a trip to the archives, and nothing more sinister, he reflected. The most difficult thing would be explaining his reasons for going — especially when he wasn't clear on it himself.

Ancient sentimentality, no doubt. Kyouraku would be most amused.

A wry smile touched his pale lips, as carefully he slid back the door of his chamber, stepping out into the moonlight.

"Are you heading out this late, Taichou?"

Almost the moment he had closed the door behind him, a voice came from the shadows, followed by the familiar, stocky form of Kotsubaki Sentarou, and he frowned, eying his subordinate with a wary glance.

"What are you doing up and about at this time, Sentarou?" He asked softly. "It's very late and you should be asleep."

"Kiyone and I drew straws as to who was going to stay on guard tonight, sir." Sentarou saluted him, his eyes bright with eagerness. "Since we were concerned over your health, and all, sir. That's all, sir."

"I see." Despite himself, Ukitake could not be annoyed. "But as you see, I'm feeling a lot better than I was. I thought a walk in the night air would help — I've been shut inside all day, and it's stuffy and hot which doesn't help my chest."

"Then allow me to accompany you, Ukitake-taichou, sir." Sentarou offered, and Ukitake sighed, shaking his head.

“I’m afraid that where I’m going, you can’t follow.” He said carefully, and Sentarou looked bewildered.

“Sir…?”

“Never mind.” Ukitake rested a hand gently on his companion’s shoulders. “Wait here for me, will you? If you won’t go back to your quarters and sleep, then at least ensure that 13-Bantai is properly protected in my absence. Understood?”

“But Taichou, I…”

“It’s all right. I promise.” Ukitake offered him a smile. “I’m not going into anything dangerous. It’s just a niggling hunch of mine, that’s all. I’m going to go to the library and sit and read quietly for a while — surely even you agree that won’t tax me too greatly?”

“To the archive, sir?” Sentarou’s beady eyes narrowed, then, “To the restricted section, Taichou?”

“Yes. The things I need to read are located there.”

“Are you sure you should be up and about? You weren’t so well earlier, after all, and…”

“I’m sure. I’m the best judge of my own health, after all.” Ukitake assured him. “I didn’t get to this age by taking unecessary gambles. But I really do feel a lot better now. Kuchiki’s coming to see me earlier helped a lot, I imagine — seeing that she’s looking so much stronger already. She’ll be back among us soon enough, and that means I don’t need to be worried about her any longer. Will you do as I ask, Sentarou? You needn’t worry about my sleep or my body… I’ve slept a lot of the day, so it’s perfectly natural for me to be awake now. And a little reading will no doubt help put my mind in a better frame for the night.”

“I suppose so.” Sentarou looked doubtful. “If you’re really sure, sir. I mean, I could come with you to the archive, and wait…”

“But then who’d take care of 13-Bantai?” Ukitake asked sensibly. “I’m counting on you, Sentarou. Don’t let me down.”

“Yes, sir. Understood, sir.” Sentarou saluted again, and Ukitake laughed, nodding his head.

“Then I’ll see you in a few hours.” He said lightly. “Thank you. I’ll leave things in your capable hands.”

So, they had finally cleared out.

Kira stood opposite the door of the 3-Bantai Captain's office, a pensive look on his face as he toyed idly with the key in his hands. The Special Forces had evacuated their investigation team earlier that afternoon and, on returning back to base, Kira had found a representative waiting for him in order to hand over the confiscated key.

He glanced at it, holding it up to the artificial light as he took in every scratch and blemish on the aged piece of metal.

"At this rate, I'm building a collection of keys to places I shouldn't be allowed access." He mused. "I didn't expect them to give it to me so easily — but maybe it's because Hitsugaya-taichou's given me this assignment. Perhaps it's that."

He shrugged, sliding the key into the door and turning it with a soft click, pushing back the divide and stepping into the office. For a moment, a wave of nostalgia washed over him, as he remembered the countless times he had slipped in here to hand reports to Ichimaru, or simply to discuss with him squad matters. But now the Captain's chair was empty, and though the room was superficially tidy, Kira knew that a lot of files and folders had probably been seized by the Special Forces as they continued their investigation.

Though we all know Ichimaru-taichou is a traitor, so they might as well put their energies into something else.

Kira frowned, resting a hand on the smooth surface of the desk. He knew that Soi Fon's subordinates were thorough and would probably have left no stone unturned in their search. Yet of all people, he knew the Captain's office better than anyone else still residing in Soul Society. He had spent hours here on more than one occasion, waiting patiently for his Captain to return from this or that errand in order to get his approval or his signature on his reports. He had often spent time just gazing around the walls at Ichimaru's collection of books and other paraphernalia, to the point where ruefully he realised that he had probably committed the room's entire layout to memory.

But now it had been searched, nothing would be in its rightful place anymore.

Just like Ichimaru himself, in fact.

Kira forced this thought from his mind, returning instead to the incident at 6-Bantai involving the Quincy. It was an unusual turn of events, he mused to himself, as he turned back towards the shelves to examine them afresh. He knew little about the Quincy as a species, and it was the first time he had ever met one face to face. Yet even so,

he was aware enough to realise that the matter was a serious one. And it had something to do with the man whose sword appeared on the list Hitsugaya-taichou had given him.

Which means I should stop daydreaming and start to find some answers. That's my brief, after all. And that's what I do, isn't it? I follow orders.

Kira's eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he put everything in its rational place. Pushing his emotional attachment to the office aside for a moment, he forced his mind to distance itself, carefully and methodically ordering information as he did so. This was one of his strengths, he knew — the ability to think laterally and theoretically, even if he was not always sure how to act practically. Yet now he drew on that strength, calling on his memory of Ichimaru's office as it had been in the days leading up to the rebellion. Had anything changed, then? He wasn't sure.

He moved across to the window, leaning against it as he gazed at the room as a whole.

Sure, it was different now, and that made it more difficult to remember. But, as Kira closed his eyes, he found that he was still able to picture everything in its normal locations. The books on the shelves, some at right angles and others piled up in an order that only Ichimaru had understood. The boxes of reports that had been filed dutifully each month by Kira himself, his Captain watching over him as he had slipped them into their correct dated location. The desk, with its varnished finish, that across one leg bore the marks of Ichimaru's trademark blade, Shinsou. He had been in a funny, teasing mood that day, Kira remembered, enjoying the look of horror and dismay that had touched his Vice Captain's face as he had casually proved that a Captain could do as he liked, even to Seireitei's furniture.

Now he thought about it, Kira realised that the office had never given much away about Ichimaru himself. He was as much an enigma now as he had been then — popular and eagerly followed, yet mysterious and drifting, without any apparent goals or aims in mind. Kira had not even realised that he and Aizen had maintained such a close rapport in the years since Ichimaru had taken over 3-Bantai, and he wondered absently if that was just his own oversight, or if Ichimaru was really as much of a master of disguise as the Captain who bore the hypnotic sword at his side.

He opened his eyes, letting out a sigh.

"Just an office." He said aloud. "A raided office, with nothing of

Ichimaru-taichou left behind."

"I sincerely hope that you are not regretting the absence of your former Captain, Kira-fukutaichou."

The cool voice made him jump, and he scrabbled at his composure, turning to face Byakuya with surprise and dismay. Hastily he bowed his head, and Byakuya sighed, flicking his fingers to indicate that the Vice Captain should be at ease.

"You seem somewhat nostalgic this evening." He said instead, and Kira flushed, shaking his head.

"It's not that." He said hurriedly. "It's… Hitsugaya-taichou asked me to check the office when the Special Forces had gone, because he thought I might know places and things that they wouldn't, and I might find something they'd missed. But it's like every sign of Ichimaru-taichou has been ripped out of this room. And there weren't many signs of him in the first place… so I don't really know where to start."

"In which case, I may be of use to you."

Byakuya's expression was unreadable, but he slipped his hand beneath the folds of his *haori*, pulling out an old volume and setting it down on the desk. "Normally, I would not be accessing information in the archives that did not relate to me, nor would I be placing that information in the hands of a Vice Captain. But I have received word from Hitsugaya-taichou and the Sou Taichou that you are temporarily to be granted Captain's access to the secure archives. In which case, there's no breach in protocol for me to do this now."

"I…" Kira looked startled, his gaze flitting to the book, then back to his unexpected guest. "I appreciate your help, Kuchiki-taichou. I've had 3-Bantai's men running ragged all afternoon, searching every area of our territory that they've been able, and researching every volume in the main library that they can access, but it's all come up empty. And with the office like this — even though I can remember it how it was, it's not like that any more."

"An office is an office. A place of work, nothing more." Byakuya said dismissively. "I've discharged my need, so I will leave you."

"All… all right. Thankyou. Oh! Kuchiki-taichou!" As Byakuya turned to leave. "May I… please… ask you something?"

"I suppose so." Byakuya turned, eying his companion expectantly.

"I… Ichimaru-taichou often spoke to you when we met by chance."

Kira looked awkward. “I wondered… if he ever spoke to you about anything… other than trivial matters.”

“I do not make a habit, generally, of socialising with other Captains with whom I have nothing in common.” Byakuya said dismissively. “No, Kira. I did not.”

“I hope I didn’t offend.” Kira bit his lip. “It’s just… I’m looking for… anything I can find.”

Byakuya pursed his lips.

“If you want my advice, Kira, you should take the Sou Taichou’s words to heart.” He said quietly. “You are not the poorest Vice Captain in the Gotei-13, but you are far short of your own potential. Your family may not have been in the upper echelons of noble society, but you are their only heir and namesake and what you do either taints or illuminates their reputation — you understand that, I hope?”

“Y… yes sir?” Kira looked blank, and Byakuya’s gaze became thoughtful.

“Your parents were of good repute, so I’ve been told.” He murmured. “It would be a shame to let them down, would it not?”

Kira frowned, remembering the frequent trips he had made to their graves before he had joined the Shinigami’s Academy, and he nodded.

“I understand.” He said softly.

“Then you would do well to follow through this errand of Hitsugaya’s and complete it to everyone’s satisfaction.” Byakuya said frankly. “You have followed for far too long, and that will no longer do. Seireitei needs strength, not people who cannot make decisions for themselves or the men beneath them. It’s time you resolved which of those you are.”

Kira dropped his gaze, feeling foolish and tongue-tied, and at this, Byakuya seemed to relent.

“That volume has information about the construction of 3-Bantai’s squad offices, dating back to the time this area of Seireitei was first put in place.” He said casually. “I could have left you to find it, but I happened to know where it was, and you might have taken time to locate it. Few people outside of the Kuchiki-ke are aware of half of the records that our archive holds, after all… I doubt that 2-Bantai’s forces will be as informed as they should be about the layout of foreign barracks. I certainly think *you’ll* find there are things on the plans of which you are not aware. All squad offices have areas that are privy

only to the Captain in charge, after all, but some have not been accessed for some generations on account of this ignorance. You would do well to discover whether or not 3-Bantai is one such squad base."

"You mean… secret areas?"

"Secret sounds far too conspiratorial. You may consider them private recesses — I believe some of them functioned as Captain's offices, before the current construction was approved and completed." Byakuya said frankly.

"I see." Kira's gaze strayed to the book. "Then I'll definitely look into it. If Ichimaru-taichou knew about it, he certainly wouldn't have told me anything. He never really did, after all. So it's entirely possible that something like that exists here, right under my nose. And if there is one here, it might be the same for 5-Bantai or 9-Bantai, so I'll mention it to Hitsugaya-taichou, too. Thank you, Kuchiki-taichou. I don't know why you're helping me, but I'm truly grateful for it."

Byakuya was silent for a moment, then,

"Kuchiki Ginrei was my grandfather." He said softly. "After today's events, I have begun to look more closely at some of the records he left behind. I have discovered without a doubt that Ginrei-jiisama was the keeper of the keys for the vault during the time of the Quincy massacre. And that he was in part responsible for sealing and confining two swords there following a Central 46 tribunal — swords belonging to two apparently deceased Captains of the Gotei 13. One was Shizuki Ametatsu of 10-Bantai. The other was Shihouin Hirohito of 2-Bantai. The blades — Hassuiryou and Eishoushi."

"Hassuiryou is on my list." Kira fumbled at his belt, pulling out the crumpled sheet of paper. "That was the weapon belonging to Shizuki-taichou, I think. But the other one… this is all I have. Shizuki-taichou's is the only name mentioned as being from the Gotei-13 elite. It's removed from a report, but… Kuchiki-taichou, do you know whether the full version of this report would be in the archives?"

"Since my Grandfather was involved, I have no doubt that it is." Byakuya agreed. "Though under strict lock and key. I have not sought it. Dead Shinigami don't interest me. However, considering the possibility that Ishida Uryuu has become somehow tainted by one of these weapons, I am concerned that someone already has control of the blades and that more untoward things might occur. In which case, the sooner you find out what you can, the better."

"Yes, sir." Kira nodded his head. "If you think it's there, then I'll go

to the archive again tonight and try and find out everything I can about Ginrei-sama's confiscation of the weapons."

"Although they were Captains, the confiscation implies that they were of criminal mind." Byakuya said evenly. "But their Vice Captains were able to hold together their relative squads until Central 46 was able to intervene and put things to rights. 2-Bantai and 10-Bantai recovered themselves and their reputation, gained new Captains and moved on. There is a lesson in this, I feel."

Kira frowned.

"I understand." He said quietly. "I intend to try and do that, too. Somehow. Thank you for your help, Kuchiki-taichou. I won't let it go to waste."

"See that you don't." Byakuya turned back towards the door, though once there he paused, casting the Vice Captain a pensive glance.

"I do not believe there is much time." He admitted. "Renji and Rukia are too close to the problem infesting this Quincy boy to view it rationally, but I am not so easily swayed by emotion, and I am able to see the risks involved. Should Ishida Uryuu somehow gain the ability to hold and use the *zanpakutou* Hassuiryou, I fear that extreme measures will have to be taken in order to prevent more trouble in Seireitei's streets. You are also a stranger to the ryoka, so I will tell you what I will not tell my own Vice Captain. If you do not find the sword and hand it safely over to the Sou Taichou before the Quincy's condition becomes all encompassing, there will be no other choice but to exterminate the danger. Even if that means ending the Quincy's life."

Kira's eyes widened, colour draining from his thin features as he stared at the Captain in alarm.

"You mean… kill him?" He whispered. "Even if it isn't his fault?"

"I have not said that, exactly." Byakuya shook his head impatiently. "I said that, if Ishida Uryuu's condition becomes all encompassing — if whatever it is invades him to the point where it is no longer distinguishable where the Quincy ends and the Shinigami begins… then we will have to take steps. And I expect you to adhere to that as though it was your own Captain giving the order, Kira. I have allowed you information to help you and have permitted your involvement in things which relate most closely to my family's past. In return, I expect you to be as efficient an officer as a Vice Captain of the Gotei 13 should be. Do you understand?"

Kira hesitated for a moment. Then, slowly, he bowed his head.

“Yes, sir.” He said quietly. “I understand. So long as I find the sword before that happens, noone will have to be killed. That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

“Then I will leave you to your studies.” Byakuya responded quietly. “And to consider the things that I have said.”

With that he was gone, and Kira drew a shaky breath into his lungs, moving across the room towards the desk and brushing his finger against the cover of the volume Byakuya had brought.

“High stakes.” He muttered. “This isn’t just a matter of me proving myself. It might mean… to obey Kuchiki-taichou’s orders, it might mean betraying Abarai-kun’s trust in me, too. I said I’d help Ishida-san if I could, after all. But Kuchiki-taichou is right. If the boy is completely consumed by whatever’s plaguing him…”

He pursed his lips, resolution glittering in his blue eyes.

“I’ll just have to make sure that doesn’t happen.” He decided firmly. “That’s what Kuchiki-taichou was really telling me. Don’t fail. And I won’t. I won’t fail. I’ll find the swords — no matter what!”

Chapter Seventeen: Jester's Gambit

Chapter Seventeen: Jester's Gambit

The archives were busy that evening.

Kurotsuchi muttered a curse under his breath, slipping deeper into the shadowy recesses of his preferred study alcove as he glared indignantly out at the other Shinigami who had dared to interrupt his work by being there. At this hour of night, the place was more usually deserted, and he had come to expect it to be this way, knowing that perusing the shelves alone made the illicit borrowing of important and irreplaceable texts far less difficult.

But tonight, he had company.

His golden gaze drifted across the old, high-ceilinged chamber, taking in Ukitake's form hunched over one of the end desks, a pile of books stacked up next to him as he thumbed methodically through them, trying not to cough at the clouds of dust they sent up with each turn. He had not noticed Kurotsuchi as he had entered — a sure sign that the man was preoccupied, for Kurotsuchi knew that hiding his reiatsu from his experienced next-door squad neighbour was an almost futile task from the beginning. Yet even though Ukitake had taken no interest in his activities, Kurotsuchi was angry that he had dared to leave his sick-bed to come at all.

His gaze became malevolent, as he glowered at the unsuspecting 13-Bantai Captain's back.

A weak man. A sick man. A walking plague who pottered in and out of Captain Meetings and voiced opinions that were irritatingly correct and heart-destroyingly popular among his peers, young and old alike. A man who had taken more sick days in the past century than he had had souls to experiment on — yet Kurotsuchi knew that, despite the deceptive weakness of Ukitake's physical frame, he could not touch the 13-Bantai Captain in a battle of spiritual strength.

It wasn't, Kurotsuchi had often grumbled to Nemu, that he himself was a weak man. On the contrary, had he not been confined so firmly for so long because of his potentially overwhelming reserves of power and his razor sharp, cutting-edge wits? Yes, he was strong. Strong enough to rule his division and his lab with a will of iron and an atmosphere of fearful respect. But Ukitake had existed almost since

the dawn of time itself — or so it sometimes seemed. And he knew — oh yes, he knew — that inside that sallow, feeble excuse for a Shinigami burned a soul with *reiryoku* that, even on a day when he was choking up blood, far outstripped Kurotsuchi's own. Kurotsuchi did not know how such a dichotomy was possible. But he was smart enough to know that it was true. And that no matter how irritating his Captain from the neighbouring division was with his constant 'opinions' and genial demeanour… there was absolutely nothing Kurotsuchi could do to touch him.

Which was a shame, almost, the scientist reflected absently. Because tuberculosis was a rare disease among souls, even now, and it might have passed the time as an interesting, frivolous little side-study.

He focused in on the spines of Ukitake's books, squinting as he read the titles.

Soul Relocation. Soul Dispersion. Standards for Re-constitution of Human Life.
Kurotsuchi's eyes narrowed to near slits.

They were all topics a Captain *might* research, he knew that, yet still somehow it bothered him that it was this Captain and at this moment. Did Ukitake suspect something, then? Had Kyouraku — damn that lazy, indolent fool! — inadvertently said something to his old friend about the books he had seen in the laboratory? If so, Kurotsuchi knew that Ukitake would hold onto it until he discovered what he wanted to know — and Ukitake was a dangerous man who had had the ear of the Sou Taichou on more than one occasion.

He would have to tread carefully, then.

At that moment the door of the archive swung open, and for a moment the newcomer hesitated in the doorway, as if unsure about what he was seeking. As he did so, Kurotsuchi's eyes opened wide with dismay and indignation, and, forgetting the fact that he had come there in order to appropriate this or that volume to add to his studies, he got to his feet, stepping out of the shadows and into the light.

"Kira Izuru! What are you doing here?"

He demanded, and at his voice Kira started like a scared rabbit, staring at him in confusion and dismay.

"This is the *Restricted* section of the Archive." Kurotsuchi took a menacing step or two towards him, his eyes glinting dangerously.

Ukitake may not be viable prey, after all, but he had no qualms about toying with a quivering, sorry excuse for a Vice Captain. Particularly this one, too, he thought cruelly, remembering the Captain's meeting and the obvious apprehension Kira had shown when faced with so many white-coated individuals.

"Only Captains are permitted access to these records. You are decidedly *not* a Captain — you are in strict breach of protocol even stepping through that door!"

"I… I beg your pardon, Kurotsuchi-taichou." Kira gathered his wits, bowing hastily in the Captain's direction. "But I… I have permission from the Sou Taichou to be here."

"From the.." Kurotsuchi's eyes widened in disbelief. "Ridiculous! Why would the Sou Taichou give a snivelling worm like you access to a highly secure area such as this? There's absolutely *no* way he'd do such a thing!"

Kira stared at him, unsure how to respond, and Kurotsuchi's eyes narrowed as he closed in on his prey.

"I'll be sure to report this breach of regulations as soon as I return to my own office." He said nastily. "I haven't forgotten that your position is under review at present, Kira-fukutaichou. I'm sure that swanning around in restricted locations would not look good on your record."

Kira gaped for a moment, then drew himself up to his full height, meeting the Captain's gaze with an apprehensive one of his own.

"I've been assigned to research something for Hitsugaya-taichou." He managed. "All of 3-Bantai have. Because of that, I've been granted access here. It's not a lie, Kurotsuchi-taichou. I'm sure, if you check with Hitsugaya-taichou…"

He trailed off, quailing a little at the dark look in the Captain's eye.

"I suppose that, for the present anyway, Kira is effectively acting Captain of 3-Bantai."

That was Ukitake, and inwardly Kurotsuchi muttered a curse. There he was again, getting himself involved in things which had absolutely nothing to do with him. Kurotsuchi greatly suspected that, if he had not had to put up with the destructive Zaraki on one side and the annoyingly intuitive Ukitake on the other, he would have been able to accomplish far more things within the depths of his laboratory over the course of his century in charge of 12-Bantai.

Kira shot Ukitake a grateful look, and Kurotsuchi scowled.

“This doesn’t concern you, Ukitake-taichou.” He said coldly. “You seem to have plenty of your own work to do — *I* will deal with Kira-fukutaichou.”

“I don’t believe the boy is lying.” Ukitake did not show any inclination to return to his desk, merely shooting Kira a warm smile. “Besides, it’s not so easy to get into the Archive without the correct authorisation. Byakuya… I mean, *Kuchiki-taichou* is not so lax about security, and would not have handed over entrance authentication for anyone without the agreement of the Sou Taichou. No doubt 3-Bantai’s investigation requires some access to the files kept here.”

“Even so, that doesn’t mean…”

“Kuchiki-taichou also knows I’m here.” Kira seemed to gain confidence from Ukitake’s remarks, nodding his head. “He gave me permission too, to come here and browse through what I needed. It’s not like I plan on taking anything from here, Kurotsuchi-taichou. I know that I wouldn’t be able to do that. But there are things that I need to look into, and so I came here to do that. I’m sorry that I caused you inconvenience by being here — but…”

“It’s quite all right, Kira.” Ukitake spoke before Kurotsuchi could react. “Is your assignment something you can speak about, or has Hitsugaya-taichou sworn you to secrecy? Perhaps I can help.”

“Not secrecy exactly.” As Ukitake led Kira carefully away from Kurotsuchi’s corner of the library, the 12-Bantai Captain was left once more reeling inwardly with indignation at the smooth, slick way in which his colleague had entered the confrontation, and, without even raising his voice, had smoothed the situation over to a point that, try as he might, Kurotsuchi could not find a way to contest. It had been deliberate, he knew that — Ukitake understood as well as he did himself that he had no intention of lowering himself to shouting comments across a peaceful library. But he did not like Ukitake any more for it, and he grimaced, sinking back down into his seat with bad grace as he amused himself briefly with ideas to make his neighbour’s life more difficult.

Then, something Kira said drew his attention back to his companions.

“Kuchiki-taichou gave me a book of plans and blueprints for the original 3-Bantai buildings, though they’re very old and a lot has changed.” He said, his tones muted yet not muted enough for Kurotsuchi’s sharp as needles hearing to pick up on. “Since Hitsugaya-

taichou is sure that the weapons aren't with 5-Bantai,"

Weapons?

"…And since they don't seem to be within Central 46, I thought Ichimaru-taichou might have concealed them in some part of 3-Bantai's offices instead."

*Surely not… **that** weapon?*

"I wouldn't have noticed, probably, if he had — I never really asked him many questions about his comings and goings if they didn't involve me."

There was a faint flicker of bitterness in the boy's tones at that point, and Kurotsuchi grimaced, rolling his eyes.

So the boy still had abandonment issues. How sweet. Yet still, if his little project for Hitsugaya involved some form of weaponry…

"It's true that the squad offices have been rebuilt several times over the years." Ukitake seemed to be thinking this over, apparently unaware of how intently Kurotsuchi was now following the conversation. "Though to be honest, I couldn't tell you with any specific accuracy whether or not there might be such a vault within 3-Bantai. Obviously it was one of the original squads — so it even predates my time. The Sou Taichou may know — but he may not remember either. The offices were all relocated to ground level at least five hundred years ago — and most Captains now probably aren't aware that there ever were underground sections to their barracks."

"I suppose, being third squad, it must have been one of the earliest to be established." Kira mused. "With 1-Bantai being as it is and 2-Bantai being the Special Forces… 4-Bantai has always been concerned with medicine and healing, right? I suppose there's a possibility 3-Bantai had a special role originally too. It would make sense — though I don't know what it might have been. There are so many squads now in comparison — 3-Bantai doesn't seem to be particularly special in any way."

"If B… Kuchiki-taichou took the time to look out plans, it means that he believes there's something on them that's worth looking at." Ukitake said frankly.

"Kuchiki-taichou did say that most squads probably have underground offices that are no longer used." Kira seemed to be thinking very hard about this. "But that Captains who didn't need them weren't always aware they were there."

“Indeed.” Ukitake agreed.

“Do you think that 3-Bantai’s might be something even more than that? That Ichimaru-taichou might have found his way into it… and he and Aizen-taichou and Tousen-taichou might have used it for whatever part of their schemes? Perhaps… even to conceal things they were experimenting on?”

“I think that’s something it’s worth your time looking into.” Ukitake nodded.

“Ukitake-taichou, I don’t want to interefere with your own work, and I’m sorry to have caused such a commotion when I came in. I should have made it clearer, I suppose, that I was allowed to be here. But… can I ask you one more thing?”

“Yes, of course. What is it?”

“Do you know anything about a sword called… Hassuiryou? Or… or one called Eishoushi?”

At this, Ukitake’s expression underwent a transformation, and Kurotsuchi’s eyes widened with malicious pleasure as he interpreted the faint dismay that flickered in the man’s dark eyes.

“Ukitake-taichou?”

“So it’s that vault that you’re seeking?” Ukitake’s voice had changed, Kurotsuchi noticed, and the hoarse note that often tainted it when he was sick had started to show through once more. Kira nodded.

“It’s complicated.” He admitted. “But I think it’s important that I find them. My original assignment had nothing to do with it, but… I think the one sword has a connection to one of Abarai-kun’s ryoka friends. Maybe they both do. And Kuchiki-taichou… he made it clear to me that if I didn’t find them quickly and return them to the Sou Taichou’s care, they might… there may be serious consequences for the ryoka and for us.”

“The ryoka being the Quincy boy, Ishida Uryuu?”

“You… know about it?”

“A little, from Kuchiki Rukia.” Ukitake nodded. “Listen, Kira. I don’t know the whereabouts of Hassuiryou or Eishoushi. I would be surprised if they were stored side by side, since the last time either of them was wielded it was a battle to the death. However, I think Kuchiki-taichou is probably correct. It’s important that they are located — much more now than ever before.”

“Do you think Aizen-taichou meddled with them, too?”

“No. It’s not that… although he may have tried.” Ukitake shook his head. “Kuchiki Ginrei and Kyouraku-taichou sealed the blades so that they could not be tampered with, and I doubt that Aizen — even with all his skills — could have breached that seal. But it concerns me… that the weapons are missing. Particularly Hassuiryou. Because even if Aizen couldn’t break the seal — there may well be someone who could. It’s near impossible to seal a *zanpakutou* away from the one who summoned it, after all. Especially if it’s a deep and well founded bond.”

“But Captain Shizuki died a long time ago, didn’t he?”

“Yes.” Ukitake sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it. “Yes he did, I’m afraid.”

“Do you… Ukitake-taichou, do you think it’s possible for the Quincy boy to be possessed by his… by his ghost? This afternoon he caused Abarai-kun some trouble at 6-Bantai, and he sounded… well, he sounded like maybe he was.”

“No. I don’t believe he’s possessed.” Ukitake looked troubled, and Kurotsuchi absorbed the expression with interest, almost sure he saw guilt cross the older man’s tired features. “If it was a case of that, I think maybe it would have been simpler. As it is…”

“Sir?” Kira looked concerned, and Ukitake shook his head, offering the Vice Captain a smile.

“Now I’m interfering in your work.” He said frankly. “A fact which Hitsugaya-taichou would doubtless not forgive me for. I’m sorry, Kira. I wish I could be of more assistance regarding 3-Bantai and the location of the vault. I was never in a position where I was involved with that form of storage — it was a duty that fell between 3-Bantai, 5-Bantai and 6-Bantai and they rotated the keys each ten years between the Captains of the squad. I know that Kuchiki Ginrei of 6-Bantai held them when Hassuiryou and Eishoushi were confined, and I know that at that time the location of the vault was deep within Central 46. However… some time in the last hundred and fifty years, the vault ceased to be used and the keys… whoever had them… disappeared. That’s all I know — and all I can tell you.”

“Kuchiki-taichou thought it might have been Aizen-taichou who took the keys.” Kira remembered. “But even if he did take them, when he was Vice Captain of 5-Bantai… he could easily have given them to Ichimaru-taichou, if 3-Bantai had a better place to store things. And… and the key that Hitsugaya-taichou gave me— the new key — it could

have been crafted to mislead people into thinking that the keys were still in 5-Bantai's hands? After all, it's not like anyone but the Sou Taichou would probably have the authority to open the vault alone, or anything. And if the key looked like it was in 5-Bantai, and people assumed it had disappeared in 5-Bantai's care… then surely… noone would think of looking at 3-Bantai at all?"

"Which probably explains why Kuchiki-taichou took such time to give you the information he did about your squad offices." Ukitake said frankly. "He's a remarkably astute man, after all. Although your own rational thought processes are impressive too, Kira-kun."

He smiled, and Kurotsuchi felt his stomach churn for the second time at the glow of pride in Kira's gaze.

Please God, spare me.

"Tomorrow I'll go over the plans again." Kira was saying now. "For tonight, surely, if I can find out a bit more about 3-Bantai and what it originally did… maybe it'll help me narrow it down. Thank you, Ukitake-taichou. I'm sorry for taking up your time."

"To be honest, it's a welcome distraction from some heavy reading." Ukitake said wryly. "Besides, I'm glad I could help, even a little bit. I'm a little familiar with the history, after all. And besides, what you've said about the Quincy boy causing trouble for 6-Bantai has just made me realise that there's someone whose advice I need to consult."

He sighed, and Kurotsuchi saw that strange, haunted expression cross his features once again.

"Tomorrow I have to speak to the Sou Taichou about opening the Senkai Gate." He added. "And I have a lot of reading to get through before I can get to that point. Good luck, Kira. I hope you find what you're looking for."

With that he returned to his pile of books, and Kurotsuchi's eyes narrowed, pondering on all he'd heard. Most of it, he reflected, had been inconsequential pap. But there was one thing…

"3-Bantai has hidden chambers, does it?" He murmured. "And Ichimaru Gin might have used those for all kinds of purposes. Including the concealment of certain missing swords. Well, Quincy boy. This is a stroke of luck, after all!"

Sunrise over Seireitei was surprisingly beautiful.

Uryuu sat back against the wall of 6-Bantai's training gymnasium with a contented sigh, gazing across at the landscape as the first rays of the spiritual world's sun began to climb into the pale blue sky. Though in many ways this world could not be more different from the one he had been born into, there were certain elements of it which were reassuringly familiar, and he smiled faintly, remembering the number of times he had watched the sun rise over Karakura, too.

Ichigo had still been sleeping when he had left the chamber, and for that small mercy Uryuu had been somewhat relieved. He had hoped to have a chance to piece together properly the scattered shards of memory from the previous day's occurances, and with the noise that his classmate often created, he knew that such a thing would have been difficult to accomplish.

The conversation with the dragon was still uppermost in his thoughts. Much as his common sense was still screaming at him that dragons did not exist, the serious way in which even Byakuya had taken his comments had made him consider the situation properly, looking at it from every angle as he tried to find a rational explanation. Had it just been Ichigo's random reflections, or even Renji's casual remarks, he could somehow have looked beyond them. But there had been something in the way Byakuya had looked at him — something that had told him that even if he didn't fully understand what he'd said yet, the 6-Bantai Captain did.

And that it wasn't necessarily good.

"You're up early this morning."

A fresh voice cut through his thoughts and he turned, shielding his eyes from the glare of the new sun as he saw Rukia scrambling down to join him. He offered her a smile, realising that he had barely seen her since the day before, and as such, she had been spared witnessing his embarrassing rampage across 6-Bantai or the humiliating scene that had followed.

"I took an early night, so I suppose it balances." He said now, as Rukia dropped down beside him. "I'm often up with the sun, though, even at home. Besides, I could say the same about you, Kuchiki-san. Aren't you supposed to be convalescing at the moment?"

"I'm not ill." Rukia dismissed this with a flick of her fingers. "It's more a case that I have to wait for my full strength to return, that's all. I'm not hampered, although Nii-sama seems to think I need to be watched every second of the day. Just right now I can't wield my *zanpakutou*, so I can't return properly to my squad."

Uryuu looked thoughtful for a moment, digesting this. Then,

“What happens, then, when you can use it?”

“When I can, I’ll have it there to use.” Rukia responded simply, and Uryuu sighed.

“It’s no good. I don’t understand Shinigami and I don’t understand *zanpakutou*.” He said helplessly.

Rukia laughed, casting him an amused smile.

“That’s because you’re a Quincy.” She said unecessarily. “It’s not as complicated as you think, though. We use spirit matter just like you do, after all.”

“I know.” Uryuu pushed his glasses back on his nose, leaning up against the wall of the building as he contemplated. “It’s just… yesterday I had a conversation with your brother and Kurosaki and some others about *zanpakutou* having minds of their own. Spirits or whatever… that they were something that could be talked directly too. I knew they were powerful, but I didn’t realise… that they could think for themselves.”

“I’m not the right person to ask technical questions about *zanpakutou* magic.” Rukia shook her head. “Nii-sama undoubtedly knows much more than me — even Renji might do, since he’s taken his training to the next level and achieved Bankai. But I do know that a *zanpakutou* is a manifestation of a Shinigami’s spirit power. It’s not like they’re completely independent beings. They come from deep within us. But unless we’re strong enough to use them properly, well, they don’t always listen to what we say.”

“Does your *zanpakutou* have a spirit as well, then?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And a name?”

“Yes. Sode no Shirayuki.” Rukia nodded her head. “It’s an ice-type *zanpakutou*. A lot of people say it’s the prettiest ice-type, as a matter of fact.”

A note of pride touched her voice at this, and despite himself Uryuu grinned.

“I find it hard to look at a weapon that way, to be honest.” He owned. “Quincy always fight with their own strength. They don’t think of it being shared with the bow.”

“But you still have to master it, right?” Rukia pointed out. “And

understand what it can do. I suppose… it'd be like if you fired your bow without knowing how much power you were firing. The same thing applies."

"Bows don't have a voice of their own, though." Uryuu murmured. "Kuchiki-san, you went to speak to your Captain yesterday, didn't you? Ukitake-san?"

"Yes." Rukia's expression became suddenly guarded, but she nodded her head. "What about it?"

"Ukitake-san's been around a long time… didn't you go to ask him if he remembered this Shizuki person?"

"Yes." Rukia sighed, glancing at her hands. "And he did remember. Shizuki Ametatsu was a Captain of the Gotei-13 two hundred years ago. Ukitake-taichou remembered him — but it was a long time ago and a lot's happened since."

"And he didn't manage to give you any more information about him?"

"He was only a Captain for about ten years, and then he died." Rukia said simply. "What else is there to know?"

Uryuu's eyes narrowed, as he got the distinct impression she was lying to him, but he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, that much I could've reasoned for myself." He murmured. "A friend of Abarai-kun's brought something here yesterday, and it had the guy's name on. Shizuki Ametatsu, Captain of 10-Bantai. If that's all Ukitake-san knew, too, going to see him was a waste of our time and his."

"Mm." Rukia was noncommittal. "Though it was nice to go back to my home barracks for a bit, and see members of my squad. I hadn't realised how long it'd been since I was there, to be honest… I'm looking forward to things getting back to normal, and going there yesterday was a brief reminder of what that was like. I guess, after Kaien-dono's death…"

She faltered, biting her lip, and Uryuu cast her a quizzical look.

"Kaien-dono? Ganju-kun's brother?"

"He was my Vice Captain, but he died." Rukia admitted. "It was… not a nice time. Kaien-dono was a very good Vice Captain and we all looked up to him. I didn't think that 13-Bantai would ever feel normal again, so I was happy to go to the Real World when the assignment came through. But now… I think that I've put it somewhat in

perspective. Speaking to his family and everything else — I think it'll be all right, when I go back."

"Death changes everything." Uryuu reflected sadly, and Rukia shot him a confused look.

"Ishida?"

"What?" Uryuu was suddenly aware he'd said something strange, and he frowned, pushing his glasses back on his nose as he tried to regain his composure. "It's true, isn't it? Death does change everything."

"Yes, it does." Rukia eyed him warily. "I just wondered why you said it… like that… in that sissy half-wistful voice. That's all."

Uryuu reddened, shaking his head.

"I didn't. You imagined it." He said frankly. "I was simply trying to make small-talk… *you* were the one who brought up your dead Vice Captain, not me."

Rukia shot him another wary look, but did not press the matter any further, and for this fact Uryuu found himself glad.

Yet, somewhere inside of him the thought nagged at the back of his senses.

Why did I say it like that? Why was it that, for that brief moment, I almost felt like I knew what Kuchiki-san was talking about. But that's stupid. Grandpa died a long time ago. I've moved past that — I've had to. Besides, it wasn't that kind of feeling. It was different. It was like… something else.

"Yo! Rukia, Ishida! What're you guys looking so down for!"

Ichigo's holler prevented the conversation from going any further, as the voice was soon followed by the Shinigami himself, leaping deftly up onto the ledge which Uryuu had navigated in search of peace only a half hour earlier.

"Something happen that I don't know about?"

"Nothing that I'm aware of." Uryuu shook his head. "We were just talking, that's all. About *zanpakutou*."

"*Zanpakutou*, huh?" Ichigo pursed his lips, and Uryuu distinctly saw a glance pass between him and Rukia as he did so. "I thought you Quincy didn't have time for Shinigami shit."

"Normally, no." Uryuu frowned, shaking his head. "But after

yesterday…"

"You really think too much about things, sometimes." Ichigo said frankly.

"Think too much? Kurosaki!" Uryuu's eyes widened in disbelief. "I blacked out and tried to blast up half of Byakuya-san's squad territory! If he hadn't shown up, who knows what I might have done! How can I think too much about something like that? I want to get to the bottom of it, dammit. I want to know what's happening to me!"

"Shh, cool it. You'll wake people." Ichigo warned him. "Jus' because we're around this early doesn't mean everyone is."

"Fine." Uryuu's brows knitted together impatiently. "Well, in that case, I'm going to go take a walk. Since obviously you two didn't find anything useful in the archive, and since Kuchiki-san apparently didn't find any answers out from her Captain yesterday… I guess I'm going to have to start finding them for myself."

"Where are you going?" Ichigo looked startled, and Uryuu glared at him.

"None of your business. Somewhere where I can think." He said archly, and Ichigo frowned.

"I should come with you." He said slowly. "Or someone should. Just in case you need us."

"You mean, just in case I go crazy and tear up half the street?" There was a note of sarcasm in Uryuu's voice, and Rukia bit her lip.

"None of us think you'd do that, you know." She said frankly. "It's just… at the moment… even you don't know when you might black out."

"No, but I'm sure I could find out." Uryuu said darkly. "I'm sure that there must be something that triggers it, even if I don't know what it is exactly yet. And if you're going to be useless and unhelpful, I'll start investigating under my own speed. That seems reasonable to me — don't you think?"

"That ain't the issue. The issue is that Byakuya will have kittens — probably literally — if you do somethin' you shouldn't an' someone ain't there t'stop you." Ichigo said tactlessly.

Uryuu narrowed his gaze.

"I do *not* need to be protected." He said coldly. "Not now, not before, and not ever. I may not have my *reiryoku*, and I may not be

entirely myself at the moment. But I'm still a Quincy, Kurosaki. And I don't need to be babysat by Shinigami. Understand?"

Before either of his companions could say anything, he got to his feet, leaping nimbly down onto the ground.

"You needn't follow me, either." He said acidly. "I'll be fine."

"Dammit, Ishida, stop behaving like a brat!" Ichigo said impatiently, and Uryuu shook his head.

"*You* stop treating me like I'm mentally unstable." He shot back. "If you want to help me, find some answers. If you can't do that, stay out of my way."

With that he turned on his heel, hurrying across the 6-Bantai courtyard and out through the big gate onto the main Seireitei throughfare. It was already busy, with squad patrols from nearby 5 and 7-Bantai beginning their early morning duties, yet noone so much as glanced at him as he slipped through the gathering black-clad figures, darting through the crowd to the other side. He had come from 6-Bantai, and he was robed in normal Shinigami attire, he reflected absently, as he watched one of the patrol leaders giving the gaggle of 7-Bantai members their morning orders. No doubt people would simply assume he was a rank and file Shinigami sent with a message from the Captain, and for the time being, that suited him fine. After all, he had business of his own to take care of.

They were hiding something from me. Something they don't want me to know.

As he made his way further into the network of offices and official buildings, he ran his mind back over the conversation with Ichigo and Rukia.

Something from Ukitake-san? Maybe. Whatever it was, they were both in on it. The way they looked at each other — it was almost as if they said a whole lot but didn't voice a word. Whatever it is, they can't want me to know about it. But if they're not telling me, that means they're protecting me — and dammit, I didn't come here just to be protected!

He darted into a side-alley as a boisterous group of men charged out of 11-Bantai's courtyard, remembering with painful clarity that getting in the way of the Eleventh Squad at any time was a serious health risk. They did not notice him, however, and once the danger had passed he stepped back out onto the dusty street, pushing his glasses more firmly up his nose as he marched resolutely towards the 12-Bantai barracks.

If Kurosaki doesn't want to tell me what's going on, then fine. I'll find my own answers. And I'll start right here.

"Well, well."

As he approached the archway, he heard a familiar, cackling voice and he froze, the hairs rising on the back of his neck as he turned slowly to meet the calculating golden eyes of the man he had come to see. It was almost, he reflected warily, as though Kurotsuchi had anticipated his coming, for he had been positioned outside of his territory, camouflaged against the wall in such a way that unless you were looking to find him, you would not have even guessed that he was there.

"It's been a long time, Quincy boy. I wondered when I'd have the pleasure of your company a second time."

"I wouldn't have thought the first time was very pleasurable, considering I blew a hole in you the size of the moon." Uryuu said coldly, gazing at his hated foe with ice in his blue eyes. "And you almost sound as though you expected me to call. This isn't a social visit, and you know it as much as I do. I want to know what you're doing, Kurotsuchi. And if you don't tell me, maybe I'll blow a similar sized hole in your skull."

"Big words for a little boy who's lost all his *reiryoku*." Kurotsuchi tut-tutted, seemingly amused, and inwardly Uryuu cursed as he registered that the Captain already knew all about his loss of power. "Yes, I'm a much more diligent scientist than that, I'm afraid… Quincy-kun. Especially when it' a subject that interests me so tantalisingly. I know you lost your spiritual abilities in order to defeat me — I should consider myself quite honoured that you'd go to such huge lengths to blow me apart, shouldn't I?"

"Don't make fun of me!" Uryuu snapped, and Kurotsuchi laughed.

"I'm quite sincere, in fact." He said evenly. "If some of the Gotei squad members had half of those do or die guts, Seireitei would probably not be such a shambles as it is. But then, I hate discussing political matters in the street before breakfast. Won't you come inside like a good boy, Quincy?"

"Inside?" Uryuu snorted. "So you can dissect me and rip holes in me and do to me the things you did to my grandfather? Not a chance."

"You make me sound quite unkind." Kurotsuchi tut-tutted. "I'm hurt. I was very good to your Grandfather. I let him be a part of my studies into the Quincy, after all. You should be similarly pleased,

Ishida Uryuu-kun. I had closed the book on your people, but after our fight, I've decided to make an exception of you."

"I already told you that I won't be your lab rat." Uryuu said coldly, and Kurotsuchi shrugged.

"I think you'll find that you don't have a say in the matter." He said pleasantly. "Will you come inside of your own accord? Or will I have Nemu break your arms and legs for you and drag you in by force?"

"I didn't come to play games with you, Kurotsuchi."

"Nor did I intend to play any." Kurotsuchi's eyes glittered with anticipation. "You came here to talk to me, didn't you? Then let's go inside and talk."

"Outside is safer."

"But less private, I fear." Kurotsuchi smiled, a dangerous, predatorial leer that sent chills through Uryuu's body. "I give you my word. I won't attempt to restrain you. At present, you see, my preparations are still far from complete. You are no use to me at the moment — not like this. I am not interested in Ishida Uryuu, the powerless Quincy, after all."

"Then what are you interested in?"

"Come inside, and perhaps you'll find out."

Kurotsuchi beckoned with his taloned finger, disappearing into 12-Bantai's territory, and after a moment of hesitation, Uryuu swallowed his doubts, following the white-coated scientist into the courtyard.

"Good boy." Once inside, Kurotsuchi turned, eying him approvingly. "You do have a little sense, then, evidently. I'm glad. I didn't want to have to maim you, but this isn't a conversation that's suitable to be had in the middle of the main street. Anyone might be listening, after all."

"I don't have anything to hide." Uryuu said frankly. "Do you?"

"Scientists always have their secrets." Kurotsuchi agreed. "And tricks up their sleeve to deal with those secrets, too. You'd like, I think, to see some of my secrets some time, Quincy. There are some fascinating specimens deep in the bowels of my lab which I extracted from the souls of some of your people, after all. You'd be quite surprised…"

"Get to the point, Kurotsuchi." Uryuu snapped, unwilling to hear more gloating tales of the man's sadistic study into the ill-fated Quincy

dead. “You said I was no use to you like this. What does that mean? Why have you sent Nemu to the Real World to watch me if I’m no use to you this way?”

“Ah, so you did detect her presence?” Kurotsuchi looked interested. “Your senses are still sharp, then. Though she should not have been so foolish. I must remember to dissect her later, in order that she remembers the next time the importance of properly cloaking her reiatsu.”

“Don’t take it out on her just because I knew she was there!” Uryuu exclaimed angrily. “You should’ve come yourself, for that matter, if you wanted to spy on me that badly!”

“You still aren’t a bit afraid of me, are you?” Kurotsuchi eyed him keenly, and Uryuu shook his head.

“Afraid of you?” He said derisively. “Afraid of a twisted circus clown who takes pleasure in treating a woman like garbage and who experiments on anyone who happens to cross his path? No. I think you’re pathetic and a waste of time and spiritual space — but I’m not afraid of you.”

“Do you swear that on your Quincy pride, too?” Kurotsuchi seemed amused, and Uryuu shrugged.

“If you like.” He said coolly. “It doesn’t change the fact that it’s true.”

“Mm.” Kurotsuchi folded his arms, eying his companion thoughtfully.

“So why, then, did you come to me?” He asked softly. “If you consider me that way… did you only come to discover why I sent Nemu to watch you? Or was there something else you wanted to know? Something deeper and more traumatising, perhaps?”

Uryuu’s eyes narrowed.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” He said darkly. “You did something to me when we fought that time. You did something and made me have these dreams and blackouts. Didn’t you? It was you.”

“Dreams and blackouts?” Kurotsuchi feigned innocence, eying him curiously. “What precisely do you mean?”

“Don’t give me that.” Uryuu snapped. “I know it was you. Noone else is twisted enough to do that!”

A wide grin crossed Kurotsuchi’s features.

“I’m sorry, Uryuu-kun, but I didn’t do anything of the sort.” He said silkily, resting one of his clawlike hands contemplatively on the boy’s shoulder, and Uryuu flinched back, glaring at him indignantly.

“Don’t touch me! And don’t call me Uryuu! We’re not friends, and I didn’t give you leave to use my name.”

“Nor did I give you leave to address me without the suitable respect due a Captain of the Gotei-13.” Kurotsuchi was unmoved. “We are equal, I think.”

He shrugged.

“Besides, what I told you is the truth, whether you glare at me like that or not. I did not make you have dreams, or blackouts. In fact, it is quite the reverse. I am aware of them, yes. I would be foolish and inattentive if it was otherwise. But my current interest in you came about because of them, Quincy. It didn’t create them.”

“*What*?” Uryuu stared at him, colour blanching from his face as he struggled to work out whether the other man was toying with him, and Kurotsuchi held up his hands in a playful surrender.

“I swear it, on the pride of the Gotei-13.” He said, a faintly mocking tone in his voice. “You brought this upon yourself, boy. If anyone did anything, it was you. And if I choose to study you from thereon in? Only natural, given the provocation. I am interested, you see, in the changes you’ve been experiencing. I’m curious about the spikes in your reiatsu and whether or not you know that when they happen, the reiatsu is that of a Shinigami, not a Quincy at all. I’m happy to see you back here, because it makes watching your movements so much more simple and so much more worthwhile. And it allows me to unearth bits and pieces of past studies, in order to do things like *this*.”

He held up his hand, a small device shadowed in the crease of his palm, and as he clenched his fist together, Uryuu felt a strange sensation flooding through his senses, hard and unrelenting as for a moment he felt like someone else had thrust themselves into his body, forcing their way little by little into every corner of his brain. Flickers of memories that weren’t his own danced through his thoughts, and fragments of images began to piece themselves together, making him feel dizzy and disorientated. For a moment, 12-Bantai seemed like some surreal half-world that wasn’t really there, and Ishida Uryuu a mere, fleeting fantasy that had sunk deep into the darkest recesses of his soul.

He drew a gasping breath of air into his lungs, clutching at his head as he fought against it, and Kurotsuchi laughed, slowly releasing his

grip on the contraption.

“Yes, you understand a little better now.” He said softly. “You created the first step, Ishida Uryuu. That was not my doing. But I am too good a scientist not to take advantage of a live specimen when it presents itself. You are a Quincy, so you will be ignorant as to what kind of spirit particles flow freely through certain districts in Seireitei. You won’t be aware that I spent a good few decades running experiment after experiment on particular spiritual materials, discovering all kinds of component parts but having no way of utilising them or testing my theories out. But even though you are ignorant, your coming was opportune. I didn’t expect you to fight with such force, and it was my defeat. I hold up my hands and admit that willingly. But in the end, Quincy, I am the one who wins. Because of that fight, you will never escape from me. And because of that fight, you’ve become an object of such clear interest it makes my hands shake just thinking about it.”

“What do you mean?” Uryuu struggled to gather his wits, staring up at his foe warily, and Kurotsuchi offered him another smile.

“If I told you everything, you might find a way to interfere.” He said, tut-tutting as he slowly shook his head. “No. I’ve told you all I intend to tell you, for now. You go back to Kuchiki-taichou’s safehouse and sit and wait like a good boy, Ishida-kun. My contraption is useful, true — but it only works over a limited period and it seems that if you are aware of its signal, you still have the willpower to fight it off. Therefore the Shinigami in you is not yet potent enough to be at full experimental levels. You need a little more time for the spirit particles to settle and properly bond with you… and I’m patient enough to wait.”

“To… bond with me?”

“I suppose you could call it… a reunion?” Kurotsuchi chuckled at his own joke, and Uryuu stared at him, trying to work out what he meant.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Nothing.” Kurotsuchi shook his head. “For now, I’ve carried out all the tests I need. Without the sword, things can’t progress any further. So I have to wait a while — and so, it seems, will you.”

“Wait a minute… the sword? What sword?” Uryuu wheeled on the Captain, apprehension in his gaze. “What sword are you talking about?”

“Ah, it seems I’ve said too much.” Kurotsuchi pursed his lips, a mock-scolding look on his face. “How silly of me. Now I’ve given you something to worry about, haven’t I?”

He grinned, his golden eyes glimmering with humour.

“What sword indeed.”

“You mean… you mean the dragon sword, don’t you?”

“Dragon sword?” Kurotsuchi looked surprised, and Uryuu nodded.

“His sword.” He said darkly. “Shizuki. Shizuki’s sword. H… H… Hassuiryou.”

As the word passed his lips, he let out a gasp, clapping his hand to his mouth as he realised what he had just said.
When you are ready to hear my name, I will tell you what I can.

The dragon’s words echoed unbidden through his thoughts, and despite himself he felt a distinct sense of unease settle in his stomach. When, then, had he come to learn the blade’s name? From Kira’s list? But no, he had not looked beyond the name of the Captain that had been so eagerly pointed out to him, and none of the others in the room at the time had mentioned it, either. From the dragon? But there again Uryuu knew he was wrong.

How, then? Who had told him? Had it been Shizuki, after all?

Kurotsuchi’s eyes narrowed to near slits as he interpreted the expression on his companion’s face.

“So it seems that you know a little more than I thought you did.” He murmured. “Who was it, boy, who told you the name of that sword?”

Uryuu stared at him, unable to find an answer, and delight glittered in Kurotsuchi’s gaze.

“I see.” He whispered. “You called it a dragon sword… I see. You heard it from the blade itself, didn’t you? You’ve spoken to Hassuiryou… oh, this is precious indeed. Even more reason for me to locate its whereabouts… Nemu! Nemu, you half-wit, where are you! I need you right away!”

“I’m here, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu emerged from the shadows at that point, and at the sight of her, Uryuu took a step backwards towards the gateway.

“What are you going to do?”

“Do?” Kurotsuchi sent him a condescending glance. “Right now, I have plenty of work to do. I already told you that you were dismissed, Quincy boy. Leave, before I have some of the men throw you out. I will find you, no doubt, when I’m ready to see you — till then you run along and amuse yourself. I’m sure I’ll find plenty to amuse me.”

He flicked his fingers in the direction of the exit, and Uryuu gazed at him warily for a moment.

“You won’t get me back here that easily.” He said frankly, and Kurotsuchi chuckled.

“Oh, we’ll see about that.” He said confidently. “If you’ve already spoken to the sword, then it’s only a matter of time. Just wait and see, Uryuu-kun. We’ll speak again. Soon, I think. Very soon indeed.”

Author’s note.

Finally Ishida gets to face off a little with Kurotsuchi. Actually, this is a very Kurotsuchi-centric chapter. (I feel dirty.:S)

I don’t know if Kurotsuchi hates Ukitake. But I can imagine that he probably would dislike both Ukitake and Kyouraku both quite a lot… for being stronger than he is, and prone to thwarting his more eccentric schemes… to be honest, the inter-captain dynamics are kind of fun to wonder about, even if there’s not a lot of evidence to back them up.

Poor Ukitake has a matter of conscience of his own to settle too, which will become clear as time goes on.

I also never get tired of writing about Kira, lately. :S

By the way, the Jester in the title is Kurotsuchi . That clown, jester theme is going to crop up here and there — full credit going to ***Alowl*** *for first referencing him in that light! :D*

Look out for the next chapter. Two ***very big*** *things will happen in it — one from the present and one from the past! :D*

Chapter Eighteen: Dragon vs Snake

Chapter Eighteen: Dragon vs Snake

The scent of blood was choking him.

As Ametatsu staggered through the scene of carnage and bloodshed, one thought alone kept him pushing through the thick stench of death, fighting off the waves of dizziness as flare after flare of spiritual torment washed over his heightened Captain's senses.

Yet he kept going, his mission all but forgotten as he struggled to seek out one individual among the mutilated corpses that littered the once beautiful land.

"Amet… atsu… san?"

From somewhere in the haze of red, Ametatsu heard the faint, feeble sound of his name and he swung around, horror flooding his heart as he registered the sight before him. Her white uniform was soaked crimson with blood, in direct contrast to the ghostly pallor of her cheeks, and her thick, beautiful hair was tangled and caked in mud from where she lay helpless on the ground. Even as he reached her, he could see the slashing wounds across her side and throat, and his heart clenched inside of his chest.

"Niji!" He exclaimed, hurrying down at her side, and sliding a tentative, ginger hand beneath her shoulders as she coughed and gasped in air. "Niji, what happened? What the hell… how did this… was it Hollows? Did you get attacked because of the things that idiot Mabisu was doing?"

He cursed, inwardly berating himself for having been so held up with Ginrei on going over the various orders that had been sent to the Real World by Central 46.

"Shihouin-taichou was supposed to be here." He muttered. "He was supposed to protect you — all of you — from the crazy ones hell bent on destroying any chance of peace. What was he doing? Call himself the head of the Special Forces — the whole point of him being here was to make sure people are looked after, dammit!"

Slowly and painfully Niji shook her head.

"Mabisu… is… dead. All… dead."

"I know that." Ametatsu admitted. "And I'm sorry for it, but it was Central 46's final decision… in order to stop this world and ours

collapsing, the Quincy who were rebelling had to be controlled. But even so, Niji, there should have been enough of us to protect those of you who wanted protection. That was the agreement, after all. The Ishida-ke should never have been involved in this. They should have been safe — what the hell was Shihouin doing?"

Niji did not reply, as a shudder wracked through her, and Ametatsu held her tightly to him, fear and confusion coursing though his veins.

"Who hurt you?" He asked softly. "Who did this, Niji? Because I swear by this damn haori *itself that I'll not let them get away with it. If it was those mad Quincy… or the Hollows he summoned… I swear…"*

"Not… Hollows." Niji shook her head again, painfully and slowly as blood continued to pour from the wound at her throat. It was not a fatal gash, Ametatsu realised, but deep enough to cause considerable blood loss, and for the first time he realised the true severity of her other injuries. She was not a soul, he reminded himself viciously. She was a human… that fragile creature whose life could be snapped and broken away in a twinkling of an eye. And even now Niji's life was hanging by the barest of threads. Panic struck through him as he realised that it was unlikely she could be saved.

"Shi… ni..ga… mi." Niji managed to croak out at that moment, sinking back against his reassuring touch as the strength of holding her own body failed her. "Shi… hou..in… san."

"Shihouin?" Fury flooded Ametatsu's heart, and he glanced around him for any sign of his fellow Captain. "But I don't understand! How? Why? This wasn't supposed to… Central 46 never…"

"All… killed." Niji's face creased in pain as another spasm of coughing wracked through her thin frame, and blood trickled down the side of her mouth as she struggled to draw in breath. "By… Shi… ni… ga… mi…"

With that, her strength gave out, and she let out a little sigh, her eyes fluttering closed. For a moment Ametatsu sat there numb, unable to absorb the true horror of what was happening but, as he felt the uneven beat of his companion's heart fade and still, he found anger and disbelief flooding through his senses. Tears filled his gaze, and, as they flowed unchecked down his cheeks, he bent to kiss his companion's cooling lips one last time.

"I'll not forget this." He said darkly, setting the still form down on the ground as he got to his feet, glancing all around him for any sign of the 2-Bantai Captain. "I'll find the truth out, Niji, and I swear… I will not forgive. No matter what he says… I will avenge your life."

"Shizuki-taichou!"

At that moment a group of Shinigami ran towards him, each one dressed in the identical clothing of the Special Operations Forces, and Shizuki glared at them, his fingers already flicking towards the hilt of his blade as he took a step or two towards them.

"What happened here?" He asked softly, a cold menace in his tones that none of them had ever heard there before, and at the intent in his expression the men exchanged startled glances, eying him in confusion.

"As per Shihouin-taichou's orders, sir, we've eliminated this sector of Quincy." One of them said at last, bowing his head slightly towards the 10-Bantai Captain. "We're preparing to move on to the next. Several of them are said to be hiding out around the Ishida-ke training grounds, so Shihouin-taichou headed there and we'll go to join him."

"Shihouin is at… the Ishida family training grounds?" Ametatsu demanded, and the soldiers nodded.

"What about Kuchiki-taichou? Where is he?"

"Still in conference with Yamamoto Sou Taichou, sir, now the confirmation has come in to release the Captains' power limits to fight." One man said respectfully, and Ametatsu's lips thinned.

"So this is Shihouin's crime alone, is it?" He said softly, and the men looked surprised.

"Crime? Shizuki-taichou, these are our orders. From Central 46. Eliminate the Quincy. Surely Taichou has heard that command as well? We're only doing what we're told."

Ametatsu's eyes narrowed to near slits and his grip closed around Hassuiryou's hilt, feeling the indignation of the blade's dragon spirit coursing through the weapon as he drew it slowly from its sheath.

"Central 46 ordered us to eliminate the Quincy who opposed us." He said coldly, every word falling from his lips like a drop of ice. "The Ishida clan are supportive of Soul Society's ways. They should never have been included in Shihouin's orders. Spilling even a drop of their blood amounts to treason against Central 46 and against Soul Society. And I will not allow anyone who commits such a crime to walk away from here with their lives."

"Shi… Shizuki-taichou?" Despite themselves, the men took a step back, and Ametatsu eyed them derisively.

"For Special Forces Operatives, you seem cowards all of a sudden." He said unpleasantly, even as he hovered his right hand over the base of Hassuiryou's blade. "Your weapons are coated with blood, yet your faces

seem to have very little to spare. Let me see if I can do something about that."

His eyes narrowed.

"Fure, Hassuiryou." *He murmured, drawing his hand purposefully across the weapon till the blade glittered and shone with all the fluidity of flowing water. As the guard curled into the glittering, scaled dragon's wing it represented, he wheeled on the frightened officers, cold resolution in his eyes.*

"For spilling the blood of the Ishida, I won't forgive you." He murmured. "But for spilling the blood of Ishida Niji, I'll take every one of your lives!"

As he spoke, his aura flared with blue light and he held the blade more tightly in his grip, aware of the beating wing-stroke and angry cry of Hassuiryou's spirit as it arched and wheeled inside of his heart. He and his weapon had been one for a long time, and now, he knew, Hassuiryou was as angry and eager for blood as he was.

"Ryuu no Baratsuki*!" He exclaimed, casting his right hand across the water-like weapon and out towards the unfortunate officers. They took a step backwards, preparing to run, but it was to no avail, for as Ametatsu's fingers twitched apart, Hassuiryou's blade shattered into a thousand needle-like splinters, each coated with the sheen of rain as they shot across the landscape. Though tiny, the fragments of the blade were narrow and as sharp as any knife blade, and as Ametatsu spread his right hand above his head, the barbs pierced through the uniform and the bodies of the unlucky Shinigami, striking straight through to the core of their soul and out the other side. The men stumbled and fell, blood pouring from their wounds, and Ametatsu drew back his blade, watching as Hassuiryou re-formed itself, the sheen now mottled as the blood of his victims combined with the water through which he controlled his attacks.*

"Shihouin is at the Ishida-ke." He muttered, slipping into shunpo as he focused his energy on reaching that location. "Who knows what damage he's already done there. But I won't let him do any more. Central 46's orders were absolute — and the Ishida-ke should have been protected. We came here to protect them, dammit!"

He bit his lip, remembering Ukitake's final words to him before he had left.

"I'm sorry, Ukitake-taichou." He murmured, his grip on Hassuiryou tightening at the memory. "But it's gone too far now to end it without bloodshed. What he's done… I can't forgive him. I won't forgive him. Even though I know you'd want me to do it differently — for Niji's sake, I can't."

He set down on the ground once more, hearing screams and the sound of conflict even as he hurried towards the entrance archway that led into the purpose built arena that the Ishida-ke had used to train in for generations. As the guards on duty hurried to greet him, he cast his hand over his blade once more, sending shards flying through the atmosphere as one by one they fell lifeless at his feet.

"I don't have time for minnows." He said aloud. "It's Shihouin that I want."

As he stepped into the training ground, the sickly scent of fresh blood once more assailed his senses, and a combination of rage and disgust welled up inside of him as he pushed forwards through the bloodstained corpses of men and women that he had known and befriended during his time in the real world. At the sight of him, those who had yet survived pulled back, as if afraid of him, and somehow this only added to his anger.

In the centre of the field, Ametatsu could see his target, his blood-specked haori *billowing out behind him as he rose his sword against one of the clan's younger members. In an instant, Ametatsu recognised the frightened form of Kenkyuu, Niji's teenage brother, and without thinking about it he darted across the training land, bringing his blade down hard against Shihouin's as he prevented him from taking the boy's life.*

"Shizuki?" Shihouin stared at him in surprise, struggling to gather his wits, and Ametatsu's eyes narrowed as he forced his colleague's blade away.

"Run and hide." He told Kenkyuu sharply. "Now. I'll deal with this — for your sake and for Niji's, I will."

Kenkyuu stared at him for a moment, not comprehending.

"Go!" Ametatsu exclaimed. "For the sake of your people, Kenkyuu, go! Gather anyone who's survived, and leave this place now, or you never will!"

This was enough, and Kenkyuu's eyes became dark with resolution as he nodded, turning on his heel and fleeing from the scene of the fight.

"What the hell are you doing?" Shihouin demanded angrily. "Shizuki, why are you trying to save him?"

"It should be me demanding to know what you're doing." Ametatsu said blackly, Hassuiryou's blade glittering with every bit as much bristling defiance as he was himself. "Why are you here, Shihouin? Why are you killing the people who've supported and helped us since the day that we came here? Central 46 never gave out that order. You're in breach of protocol."

“The orders are open to interpretation.” Shihouin’s eyes narrowed as he thrust Ametatsu’s weapon away from his own. “You might be naive enough to be blinded by pretence of complicity, but these are Quincy, boy. Quincy! A human aberration which should never have been permitted to get to this level. They’ve caused us no end of trouble for generations. Central 46 handed down an execution order and I’m only too happy to obey it. They summoned Hollows here. People got killed. It’s time that they realised there’s a price to pay for crossing us and upsetting the balance.”

“But we were sent here to negotiate with them, not kill them.” Ametatsu did not break his stance, and as Shihouin tried to knock him aside he stood firm, acting as a barrier between his fellow Captain and the few Quincy who as yet had managed to keep their lives. “And to accept any who wanted to work with us towards peace in the future. I know what our orders are, Shihouin. I know that Central 46 released the limits on our reiatsu and told us to kill those who opposed us. But the orders also said clearly to protect any who wanted to cooperate. You’ve wilfully ignored that part of it simply because you felt like it. What kind of attitude is that, for a Captain of a squad to have!”

“I know what this is.” Shihouin’s eyes became slits. “This is because my men slit the throat of that girl, isn’t it?”

“That girl?” Ametatsu’s eyes became wide with anger, and Shihouin nodded.

“Niji.” He said mockingly. “I know all about it. You foolish young idiot — how can you hope to think objectively when you become so hopelessly embroiled with the enemy right from the start? You have a lot to learn about the world, even now. The Quincy have been Shinigami enemies for years. Do you really think that if we pulled out and let any of them go they’d keep their word and allow us sovereignty? Of course not. You’ve seen, surely, how they work. Summoning Hollows in defiance, endangering ordinary souls… it’s not natural, Shizuki! Even you must see that! These are humans, dammit! The spiritual world is our domain. They have no business interfering and if they do, they should be prepared to face the consequences!”

Ametatsu was silent for a moment. Then he shook his head, slowly raising his blade above his head as clouds began to gather and thicken over the training ground.

“You’re the one who should be prepared to face the consequences.” He said blackly. “Because I won’t forgive you. If you want to keep killing Quincy, Shihouin, you’ll have to kill me first. I’m deadly serious… so long as I’m here, there’s no way you’re going to get away with what you’ve done.”

“You think a Rukongai boy like you can defeat a noble son of the Shihouin-ke like me?” Shihouin mocked, looking amused. “I’ve been trained for combat and stealth my whole life, you fool. Even if you have worked with Ukitake for a long time, there’s no way you’re stronger than I am. You’ll be diced up like one of those Quincy you so boldly favour — is that what you want? To die here with them?”

“Better that than to start killing them like you!” Ametatsu shot back. “Raise your weapon, Shihouin. Release your blade. I’m not moving from here, and if you don’t release it, I’ll kill you outright. I don’t care if you are a Shihouin, or if you have higher reiatsu than me, or if you’ve been trained since you were a boy. I grew up in a place where if you didn’t fight for what you wanted, you didn’t survive. And Im not someone who gives up, either. I’m no coward… and I don’t intend to let you spill any more Quincy blood!”

Shihouin’s expression darkened, and slowly he nodded his head, his right hand tightening around the thin, snake-patterned hilt of his own blade.

“It’s your funeral.” He said softly, pulling the sleek black weapon up before his face. “Don’t cry to me when I sever your soul and abandon you to wander the Earth in perpetuity.”

Ametatsu’s gaze hardened, and he nodded.

“Likewise.” He murmured. “Hassuiryou and I are ready.”

“Then get ready to die.” Shihouin flicked his blade in Ametatsu’s direction. “Musube, Eishoushi.”

At the Captain’s command, long, vine like whips curled out from the hilt of the blade, shooting across the landscape towards Ametatsu as they curled themselves tightly around his arms, reaching for his throat and Ametatsu gasped, struggling to pull free from the weapon’s determined grip. He had seen Eishoushi in action only once or twice before, though he had never faced it himself, and as more and more black, leathery tendrils curled out towards his body, he muttered a curse, knowing that on those occasions, there had never been any need for a second attack. If he hesitated, Eishoushi’s suffocating techniques would crush his bones and stifle his airways, killing him before he’d even had a chance to move. He gathered his wits, closing his eyes and focusing his energy on Hassuiryou’s blade even as he felt the exploring vines of his enemy’s blade flicker across his throat.

This is a fight we can’t lose, Hassuiryou. Promise me you’ll not give up, not even if it seems that I can’t fight any more. I’m trusting you — there’s never been a fight I’ve more needed to win than this. Will you fight with

me, no matter what?
A foolish question.

The dragon's response was matter of fact.

I fight with you, Ametatsu. You and I are a team. Where you lead, I follow. Where you falter, I move ahead. If this is your enemy, we will kill him. No matter what.

Thank you, Hassuiryou.

Relief flooded Ametatsu's heart, and he opened his eyes, meeting Shihouin's derisive gaze head on.

"Ryuu no Baratsuki!" *He managed, and in a moment, Hassuiryou's blade shattered into shards once more, slicing deep into the thick, black skin of Eishoushi's attack. At the intensity of the blow, Shihouin let out an exclamation, pulling his weapon back before it could be shredded into ribbons, and as Ametatsu regained control of his own body, he faced the other Captain resolutely.*

"I'm not a rank and file Shinigami." He said flatly. "It takes more than one little attack to kill me, Shihouin. I'm a Captain, just as you are. I won't be underestimated — even if you think I'm beneath you."

"I don't think it, I know it." Shihouin snapped back, launching his curling, medusa-like blade at his opponent a second time. "This is only the tip of what Eishoushi can inflict on a victim. Pray you never see the full depths of what it is capable of doing to a man's soul."

"I could say the same about Hassuiryou." Ametatsu brought his right hand up before his face, summoning the shards of his weapon back to form a blade as he used it to knock back each of Eishoushi's ever-multiplying tendrils. "You've never seen how hard I can fight either, Shihouin. You've never wanted much to do with the Captain from Rukongai, when all's said and done, have you? You might find that's your undoing, today — you don't even know your opponent's skills."

"I know you're a foolish, lovesick little boy who only got to the heights he has because for some inexplicable reason Ukitake thought well of you." Came Shihouin's cutting rejoinder. "And Ukitake is a Captain who has people's respect. You owe you position to him and his influence, not your own skill. Otherwise there's no way a runt from Rukongai would ever wear the haori. *Your conduct here is proof of that — you don't have the grit it takes to be a Captain and act for Soul Society's greater good."*

"You call slaughtering innocent people the 'greater good'?" Fury flooded through Ametatsu's veins at this, as white light flickered at the edge of his fingers. "Then God forbid me from ever becoming that kind of Shinigami,

Shihouin! I will never descend to your level, noble house or otherwise! We're not here to kill the innocent! We're here to keep the balance, not make decisions for ourselves!"

"And that applies to you, too!" As Ametatsu fired his byakurai *blast across the landscape, Shihouin brought Eishoushi up before his face, forming it back into a normal blade and deflecting the attack into a nearby tree, which burnt and fizzled to the ground. "You call that an attack? I could have deflected it with my eyes closed. If this is as serious as you get, Shizuki…"*

"Not even close." Ametatsu's gaze darkened, as memory of Niji's bloodsoaked body once more wrenched through his senses. "I came here to stop you, Shihouin — no, that's not true. I came here to kill *you. No matter what the consequences, I made up my mind that I won't let you walk away from here. Even if you broke Seireitei's rules and twisted Central 46's commands to your own ends, I won't let them be the ones to decide your justice.* I *will be Niji's vengeance —* I *will be the one to strike you down. No matter what it takes — I will."*

He raised his blade to the heavens, and above his head, flickers and hazes of light danced across the dense dark clouds.

"Ryuu no Arashi*!" He exclaimed, as all at once the heavens opened, shards of boiling hot rain cascading to the ground. As Hassuiryou's blade flickered and glowed with energy, Ametatsu thrust his blade out towards Shihouin as the shards of rain followed his command, pouring down on the other Captain's head with relentless, unforgiving force. As they touched the ground and the edges of the Shinigami's white* haori*, they sizzled and burnt wherever they touched to black, and Shihouin let out a curse, bringing Eishoushi up above his head as some of the burning shards touched his skin.*

"Kakumae, Eishoushi*!" He exclaimed, and as the weapon glowed with strange energy, two black vines shot out at right-angles from the hilt, forming a sturdy shield between them.*

"Is that all you can do?" Ametatsu demanded, a mixture of giddy adrenalin and cold resolve flowing through his thoughts as he eyed his companion coolly. "Shelter from my barbs? And I haven't even begun to unleash the storm yet, Shihouin. I thought Eishoushi was a stronger blade than that — have I been misled?"

"You underestimate me." Shihouin snapped back, wheeling his sword arm around and flinging his shield out in the direction of his opponent. "Eishoushi's shield absorbs the attack and sends it right back. You like your 'barbs' so much? You see how much impact they have now."

Ametatsu cursed, bringing his blade swiftly across in front of his body as the splinters of metal shot back towards him, devoid of the rain that had coated them and allowed him to control their direction.

"But like I said, it's just the start." He said flatly, pointing his blade at the heavens once more. "I can keep it coming as long as you like, Shihouin — you can't defend against scalding rain and attack me at the same time."

"Can't I?" Shihouin spread his shield over his head once more as the boiling rain poured down, growing heavier and heavier as Ametatsu poured reiatsu into his attack. Red light flickered from the other captain's left hand, and Ametatsu snorted, shaking his head as he countered it with a second blast of byakurai.

"Kidou's a special talent of mine." He said frankly. "No matter what else I'm doing, I can always attack with it. And I can always counter it. You won't beat me that way, Shihouin. I've always been good with magic."

"And at shooting off your mouth, it seems." Shihouin said coldly. "You haven't realised yet that once Eishoushi has been released, there's no limit to how much I can use his Shikai forms. Even in tandem with one another, if I so choose. Your rain is all very well, Shizuki, but you can't pierce through a shell as hard as Eishoushi's. Yet while you focus your energy on that, you can't split your blade — can you? And you can't defend against Eishoushi's other attack… can you?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, several snake-like tendrils shot out once more across the training ground at such speed they caught Ametatsu off guard, knocking him to the ground. His sword fell from his grip, breaking the storm-like spell in an instant, and Eishoushi's vines continued to surge towards him, wrapping themselves firmly around his arms and body as once more they reached for his throat.

"If Eishoushi's whip pierces your jugular, boy, it's all over." Shihouin stepped closer, his eyes glittering with cold anger as he stared down at his apparently helpless prey, and Ametatsu felt a surge of panic well up inside of him as the tips of Eishoushi's searching tendrils began to brush once more against his throat. "I'm a Shihouin, if you hadn't forgotten. I deal in stealth and subtlety as much as brute force. Eishoushi defends against your rain shards because of how hard his blade is. But it has to be that hard, because within it is concealed a paralysing poison that not even a Captain of Kuchiki Ginrei's calibre would be able to resist. As soon as it enters your blood stream, you are doomed to die. It's over already, boy. Your swordplay is pretty, perhaps — but you don't have what it takes to defeat me."

At this, Ametatsu felt the first trickle of blood began to run down his

neck, and his heart clenched in his chest. An image of Niji flooded his senses once more, as frantically he struggled against Eishoushi's grip, fighting to get free.

Then, in the depths of his brain, he heard a voice.

You said you were fighting together with me, didn't you? Then let me fight. You can't beat him on his own. Release me, Ametatsu. Together we can defeat him.

"Ha… Hassuiryou." Despite his predicament, Ametatsu found comfort and new resolve in the calm of the dragon's voice, and he gathered his wits, focusing on everything he had ever been taught.

"Shou*!" He exclaimed, forcing all his reiatsu into the Kidou blast and, as Eishoushi's vines were thrust away from his body he pulled himself into a sitting position, bringing his hands together quickly for another attack.*

"Souren soukatsui!" *He yelled, as blue electricity flooded from his hands, striking Shihouin square in the midriff and sending him staggering backwards, struggling to retain his balance. At his opponent's brief moment of weakness, Ametatsu was on his feet, grabbing up Hassuiryou in his hands once more as he charged his companion down with a blood-curdling cry.*

For a few moments, blade clashed on blade as, techniques forgotten, the two men found themselves wrapped in a vicious exchange of sword parries and blows. Shihouin's weapon cut through Ametatsu's skin, then Ametatsu's pierced through Shihouin's haori *to the flesh below, and as blood began to stain the pure white of both Captains' robes of office, Ametatsu found that his resolve was curling up inside of him, hardening and growing with every swipe of the blade.*

He could win this. Hell, for Niji's sake, he had *to win this. No matter what, he would not let Shihouin get away with what he had done. No matter if it killed him… no matter what. He would triumph here now — no matter what it took to achieve.*

Then, at the back of his senses, he felt the faint, familiar flicker of Ginrei's reiatsu and he cursed, realising that if he did not end things soon, the third Captain would be on the scene and between them, breaking up the battle and stealing away his justice. Beyond reason now, and unable to see any course other than slaying the man who had caused so much destruction and pain, Ametatsu hardened his heart, shoving Eishoushi's blade away from him as he summoned his reiryoku*, surrounding his body in a bold azure glow.*

"Enough playing." He said coldly. "Let's end this. Bring out Eishoushi's

Bankai, Shihouin. Let's fight this properly, and see who really is stronger, shall we?"

"That's something you'll regret asking." Shihouin said mockingly, though from the blood soaking through the other man's clothing, Ametatsu knew that he had landed as many blows as he had received himself, and something about this fact gave him faint comfort. "If you want to die that quickly, then I'll oblige you. Watch, because it's the first and last time you'll ever see a Bankai of this power."

He held out his blade, tipping it horizantally and gripping the tip in his left hand as his reiatsu flooded through the area, and Ametatsu knew that his opponent was as serious as he was. He was fighting for Shihouin pride as much as Ametatsu was fighting for the dead Quincy, and it would be a battle to the death either way.

"Bankai." *He said evenly, as between his fingers the sleek black blade began to stretch and curl into the winding form of a snake, red eyes glittering as it leered in Ametatsu's direction, baring its poisoned fangs.*

"Eishoushi Ja-Henshin" *Shihouin said softly, and the snake began to swell and grow in size, spreading across the landscape as it cast shadow down over the two fighting Captains. Ametatsu stared at it for a moment, fear piercing his heart. Then he remembered his resolve, and he nodded, taking Hassuiryou and flicking it over, clasping it in his weaker right hand as he ran the palm of his left hand from hilt to tip.*

"Bankai." *He exclaimed.* "Suiryou Utenshin!"

In an instant, Hassuiryou was surrounded by dazzling bright light and, as the heavy, windswept beat of his wings began to echo the pounding of Ametatsu's own heart, the blade surged up towards the heavens, glittering with silver energy as it morphed into the form of a dragon, letting out a predator's cry as it soared and wheeled in the sky above their heads.

"So you play with beasts, too, it seems." Shihouin reflected. "But can your dragon beat a snake charged with poison potent enough to still a zanpakutou *and slay its master in one fell swoop?"*

"Don't count it out." Ametatsu's voice became steely, as he registered the ever approaching sense of Ginrei's shifting reiatsu. "I don't have time to talk to you. Kuekorose, Hassiryou!"

At his command, the dragon let out another sky-splitting shriek, diving down towards the ground as it launched its immense jaws in the direction of Shihouin's Bankai. For a few moments the two beasts sparred, as Hassuiryou tried to snap the snake in his jaws, and Eishoushi struggled to pierce the dragon's hard, scaly hide with his poisoned fangs. Yet all the

time, Ametatsu knew that Ginrei was drawing closer. And if he delayed any longer, he would be caught, arrested and prevented from completing his aim.

Yet to release the full force of the dragon's flood within the training ground was something he was hesitant to do. Despite how hard his emotions were driving him on, he knew that to do so would involve any Quincy left in the area, taking them down in the same blast as it took down Shihouin, and despite his urgency, he hesitated, flickering his senses out across the landscape as he tried to ascertain whether or not any of the surviving archers had remained in the area to watch the fight.

With a flash of relief, he realised that they had taken his warning to Kenkyuu to heart, and had fled, abandoning their territory as they disappeared into the darkness with their lives.

In which case…

"Hassuiryou!" He exclaimed, and the dragon let out an answering cry of assent. "Let's finish this once and for all!"

Hassuiryou tossed back his head in acknowledgement of his master's command, spreading his immense wings and launching himself up into the heavens, well out of the reach of Shihouin's curling, writhing serpent. There were gashes on the dragon's legs, Ametatsu noted, but his sword had escaped being poisoned, and for this he felt a flicker of relief, raising his hands both over his head as he sent all of his remaining reiryoku *flooding into his blade's Bankai form.*

As he did so, Hassuiryou spread his wings to their full span, his golden eyes glittering as he opened his immense jaws.

"Chuusui o shiro*!"*

Ametatsu exclaimed, and at the command, the dragon arched his neck, releasing a flood of water from between his glittering teeth. Shihouin cursed, strengthening his snake's defence as he drew on the blade's strong shield-like skin to deflect the blast, but Ametatsu had thrown caution to the wind now and there was no stopping the force of his attack as the surging water flooded through the training ground, taking down trees and fences in its relentless push forwards. As Ametatsu strengthened his focus once more, the dragon let out a second, then a third blast of water, beating his wings hard enough to create a guiding breeze, and with one final thrust of energy, the water broke past Eishoushi's shield, pushing forwards until it engulfed both Shihouin and his sword in its rampage.

"Do you think a little water can stop a snake?" Shihouin demanded, and Ametatsu nodded his head, his eyes glittering with the adrenalin of the

final stage of battle.

"Hassuiryou's flood doesn't just sweep away everything it touches." He said coldly. "It also sweeps away the enemy's spiritual power. Including yours, Shihouin. This battle is over. You can't fight me any more — your snake won't listen to your commands now that Hassuiryou's scrambled its sense of self."

"Don't be so sure of that!" Shihouin pulled himself to his feet, grasping his blade's hilt tightly, but Ametatsu was beyond hesitating now. He cast his left fist into the sky, raising his gaze to meet Hassuiryou's golden one.

"Kuekorose*." He said softly, and a glint of the master's blood-lust was reflected for the briefest instant in the dragon's gaze as it swooped down, letting out another earth shattering cry as it dove towards its unsuspecting prey. Shihouin tried to counter, but the effects of Ametatsu's desperate flood had taken their toll, and without a shred of mercy in his heart, Ametatsu guided his dragon down towards the enemy, watching with no feeling at all as the immense beast clasped the other Captain in his huge jaws.*

"He's your prey, Hassuiryou." He said flatly. "Do what you want with him, but make sure that he doesn't survive. For Niji's sake, make sure he spills as much blood as she did. I won't let these things go unavenged."

As you wish, Ametatsu.

As the dragon's voice echoed once more in his thoughts, Hassuiryou's jaws closed more tightly around his prey, and Shihouin let out an agonised scream as blood began to gush from his body, dripping onto the water-soaked ground below. Hassuiryou did not release its grip, however, only tightening its hold until Shihouin ceased to scream or struggle. Then it unceremoniously opened its mouth, dropping the broken, lifeless body down onto the soil below.

Ametatsu took a step or two towards him, gazing down at the mangled corpse of the former Captain of the Second Division. For a moment he just stared, struggling to absorb what he had done. Then, as he remembered once more Niji's cruel death he frowned, his anger surfacing once more in his heart. Bending to scoop up the discarded, resealed Eishoushi, he glanced at it, then, with some force he thrust the weapon deep into Shihouin's lifeless body.

"I told you, didn't I, that I would avenge her." He said, his words sounding strange and foreign to his own ears. "I only wish that you were able to feel the regret that I do for what tonight's made us both become."

He raised his sword hilt to the sky, summoning the dragon's spirit back

into its sleeping form, and as he glanced at the blood on its blade, he sighed, sliding it back into its sheath.

"Shizuki!" Ginrei's voice broke through his daze and he swung around, realising that the 6-Bantai Captain's reiatsu had drawn even closer and that in a matter of moments he would stand face to face with another Captain on this blood-soaked field of battle.

"But I don't intend to fight a man who isn't my enemy." He resolved, slipping into shunpo. "So I'll go back. Back to Soul Society. And then… somehow… I'll work out what to do."

The images blurred and faded, and Uryuu opened his eyes, breathing hard as sweat coursed down his face. Fumbling in the darkness for his glasses, he threw back the bedcovers, unwilling to be sitting still as the surge of emotions still welled within him. For a moment he thought he might break down and cry himself and he battled back against the sensation, struggling to restore order in his mind.

So now he knew.

Now he understood… the reasons for Shizuki's disgrace.

I'm sorry, Uryuu.

The voice startled him and he swung around, expecting to see the ghostly dragon somewhere in the chamber, but there was noone there but himself and the still-sleeping Ichigo. For a moment Uryuu glanced at his companion, lost to the world, and envied him the fact that he could stay so rested despite such a huge surge in unfamiliar reiatsu. Then, the next moment the voice spoke again, driving all other thoughts from his head.
You do understand, I think? No, I know you do. I can see it in your eyes. You understand perfectly.

Uryuu swallowed hard, slowly nodding his head.

"Where are you?" He murmured. "I don't see you this time — are you here or are you still inside my head?"

The blade that Ametatsu wielded in that battle is sealed away from prying eyes. My full power is sealed within it, also. But I can reach you through telepathy, because you are more open now than you were the last time we spoke. I had hoped to protect you from seeing these things, Uryuu. But now you have seen them… perhaps it is for the best.

"You mean you didn't make me see them?" Uryuu rested his hands on the window sill, gazing out at the dark night sky.

No. I have no control over your memories. Only you have control over those.

"But that's not my memory!" Uryuu only just remembered to keep his voice down.

I'm afraid that it is. Or at least, it was. Albeit a long, long time ago.

Uryuu faltered, struggling to comprehend this. Then, as another thought crossed his mind, he frowned.

"Dragon, your name is Hassuiryou, isn't it? You're the dragon from his battle… you're the blade with whom he cut down that Shihouin guy."

Yes.

"And all those things… they really happened, didn't they?"

Yes.

"Ishida Kenkyuu was my Grandfather's grandfather." Uryuu murmured, pressing his fingers absently against the glass as he put the pieces of the jigsaw back into place. "Ishida Kenkyuu survived because of you and… and this Shinigami. My Grandfather was raised by him, and trained. It was my Grandfather who taught me everything about being a Quincy — and who wanted me to have tolerance for Shinigami even despite the past. My Grandfather who wanted me to be called 'Uryuu', rather than follow the family tradition of including 'ken' in a boy's name. Uryuu reads the same way as Ametatsu. That's why, isn't it? That's the connection — the cycle that I hadn't seen yet. Shizuki Ametatsu saved Ishida Kenkyuu's life. Because of that fact, the Ishida clan survived. Because of that fact, Grandfather gave me Ametatsu's name. But because there was no way a Quincy could be named after a Shinigami, he changed the reading. He made it 'Uryuu'. And my father — my father who considers the Quincy code worthless because it doesn't earn money… he agreed to use it."

He glanced at his hands.

"Meaning that I owe my existence to a Shinigami." He whispered. "Don't I?"

Little by little you are coming to understand. Though you are far more tied to that Shinigami than you know.

"That means… Ishida Niji was definitely a kinswoman of mine." Uryuu's brain was working swiftly now. "Even though I never knew about her. And the whole thing… everything… is true. She broke Quincy rules by consorting with a Shinigami, and she was killed for it.

But even then — even in the midst of the massacre… there was a Shinigami who wanted to save her life. To save Quincy lives. Even then, the things that Grandfather believed in were already being discussed. Even then…"

He sighed, closing his eyes.

"Shizuki Ametatsu lost his mind, in the end, didn't he?" He asked softly. "And that's why he was sentenced to death. Because he went crazy and lost his reason."

Ametatsu did not lose his mind, nor was he executed.

The dragon's voice was full of censure, and Uryuu stiffened, confused by the change in tone.

If you saw, then you should know. He was upset, yes. Griefstruck, definitely. But he was never insane. He was in his right mind when he killed Shihouin Hirohito. And he was in his right mind when he took me back to Soul Society and spoke to Ukitake Juushirou about the events that had taken place. He was judged insane after his death… but he never was, Uryuu. You should know better than anyone… he was not insane.

"Then why would he make me attack 6-Bantai's offices and demand information about your whereabouts?"

That was not Ametatsu's doing, as you should well know. There was outside interference — Ametatsu would never have acted like that."

"Outside…" Uryuu's eyes narrowed. "Kurotsuchi?"

Perhaps. I do not know.
"And you just said… Ukitake… Juushirou? Ukitake-san… Kuchiki-san's Captain?"

Yes. The one man whom Ametatsu could rely on to see things as they truly were. And he did. But even so, he couldn't change things.

"Ametatsu-san still killed a lot of people. If he wasn't crazy when he did it, then surely… surely that makes it worse?"

Uryuu bit his lip, half thinking he imagined the faint reflection of the dragon's eyes as he met his own gaze in the window.

Possibly it does. But Ametatsu made his decision and he stuck by it. He saw it out… right to the end.

"Which was?"

He avenged Niji's life. He did so knowing that his own life was forfeit. Therefore when he had killed Shihouin, he returned to Soul Society to face

his justice. He attacked the one Captain he knew there was no chance of him defeating — Yamamoto Sou Taichou. And in doing so, he relinquished his life. For Ametatsu, that was his only justice. To die at the hands of a Captain for spilling the blood of a fellow Captain.

Uryuu considered this carefully.

"He committed suicide, in other words." He realised. "He went into a battle he couldn't win, intending to be killed?"

Yes, Uryuu. That is exactly what he did.

"And you didn't try to stop him?"

Why would I do that? It was his decision. I am his blade, but I am not his master. Just as your bow does not define your actions, so I am unable to define his. I act as he instructs me… not the other way around. I may teach him, yes — this is a zanpakutou's role. But ultimately, a Shinigami is a blade's master. And a zanpakutou only acts in the way his master sees fit.

"I guess I'm still not used to the idea of a *zanpakutou* having its own spirit, so I suppose the question's a bit academic. Quincy bows aren't like that, after all."
I suppose there is also still much I don't understand about the Quincy.

"It still doesn't explain why you can speak to me, though." Uryuu sighed. "More open, you said — but Byakuya-san said it wasn't possible to speak to another Shinigami's sword like this. I'm not even a Shinigami, if everything is as it should be. And Byakuya-san's also sure that Shinigami — dead or otherwise — can't possess living souls. So where does that leave me? How are we having this conversation, if all those things are impossible?
The Kuchiki Captain is correct. Those things are impossible. But I have already answered your question. You are far more tied to Ametatsu than you realise. His fate and your destiny are entirely intertwined. Just as these memories are yours, although you were not present when the events took place. So am I your weapon, although you have never wielded me or laid a finger on my hilt. You understand now, Uryuu? I can speak to you for that reason and that reason alone.

Uryuu froze, horror glittering in his eyes as he understood the full impact of the dragon's words.

"You mean… that I'm… somehow… his *reincarnation*?" He whispered. "Dammit, *that's* what Kurotsuchi meant when he said a 'reunion'? He meant that… I was… in a past life… a goddamn Shinigami?"

Is it really so horrifying a realisation?

"Damn right it is! I'm a Quincy, for God's sake!"

And the Quincy and the Shinigami must be enemies? I do not understand this. Ametatsu believed the two could find common ground. You sleep here in quarters alongside a boy who possesses Shinigami powers and carries a zanpakutou. Are you not allies?

"Well… yes… but…"

Quincy are possessed of high spiritual power. So are Shinigami. Quincy hunt Hollows. So do Shinigami. Where, then, is the disparity?

"I…"

"Ishida?"

Before Uryuu could respond, Ichigo's sleepy voice came from across the room and he spun around, instinctively knowing that the dragon's connection to his thoughts had flickered and gone in the blink of an eye.

"Kurosaki!"

"Who are you talking to?"

"Noone." Uryuu sighed, sinking back down onto his futon. "Noone, Kurosaki. It's late. Go to sleep."

"I was." Ichigo hauled himself into a sitting position. "Only you were yappin' to someone, an' your voice woke me up. Was someone here? I didn't see anyone, but…"

"No…" Uryuu removed his glasses, rubbing his temples. "I told you. Noone was here."

Ichigo rubbed his eyes, peering at his Quincy companion for a moment. Then,

"I know I heard you. Did you black out again?"

"Aren't you listening to me?"

"Sure, I'm listening." Ichigo stifled a yawn, nodding his head. "Just there've been a lot of things lately which I've remembered more clearly than you have. And you've been funny all day today, if you want the truth — ever since you got back from your 'little walk' you've been spaced out and quiet. So I was asking. You ain't about to go postal on me, are you? Because if you are…"

"It's all right." Uryuu shook his head. "I don't think I blacked out. I

don't feel as though I did. And I had a dream, and it woke me. But…"

He paused, turning to face his companion with a thoughtful look on his face.

"Kurosaki, you've spoken to Zangetsu, haven't you?" He asked. "You said as much, before. Does that mean… is he able to speak to you whenever, now? Even if you're parted… can he still reach you?"

"Why that question all of a sudden?" Ichigo was awake now, confusion flooding his brown eyes. "Ishida…"

"Well?"

"I guess." Ichigo sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "Usually it's during battle, though. Most often when I'm about to get killed, and he digs in and helps me find my way through. I s'pose in the end he's taught me a lot… in one way or another. Though… I haven't heard his voice recently. I guess now I've got Bankai, there's nothing left to teach."

He frowned for a moment, his gaze flitting to his sword, and Uryuu's brows knitted together thoughtfully.

"I see." He murmured. "I think… maybe I'm coming to understand. Even if it's just a little bit… I think that I am."

"Well, I'm glad one of us is." Ichigo said blackly. "Wanna share the feelin' with the rest of the class? I did come here to help get your butt out of trouble, so you could at least keep me up to date."

Uryuu was silent for a moment, then he shook his head.

"*You* weren't intending to tell *me* what Kuchiki-san heard from Ukitake-san." He pointed out. "Although I know she told you something… you've kept it from me. Are you afraid to tell me what it was he said, Kurosaki? Are you afraid it might drive me out of my wits, if I know all about Shizuki Ametatsu's bloodstained past?"

"Ishida…" Ichigo's head jerked up and he stared at his friend, disbelief and consternation crossing his gaze. Uryuu nodded.

"I know." He said softly. "I *know* that Shizuki Ametatsu killed another Captain and I *know* that he died because of it. I *know* that he took vengeance on the Shinigami for killing someone they should not have killed. I know what he did, Kurosaki. And I hate that you know too, and weren't prepared to tell me. I hate being protected… that isn't why we're here."

Ichigo groaned, rubbing his temples.

“It was Rukia’s idea, not mine.” He said at length. “Jus’ because she thought it’d stress you out more’n you already are. An’ I guess she was right — you have enough shit on your plate. Besides, what does it matter what he did? He’s dead, right? That’s the past. It doesn’t make a lot of difference, in the end.”

“On the contrary, it makes all the difference in the world.” Uryuu said frankly.

“What do you mean?”

Uryuu slowly shook his head, and Ichigo rolled his eyes.

“Okay, fine, so you’re pissed off with me because I was keepin’ it secret. Fine. I’m sorry, all right? I didn’t mean to ‘protect’ you, or whatever you’re so offended about. Stop sulking about it an’ spit out whatever it is already, will you? You said you had a dream. Are you gonna tell me what was in it? Or…?”

“Just what we’ve been talking about. What happened between Shizuki Ametatsu and Shihouin Hirohito. Nothing else.”

“And that’s it? You ask questions about Zangetsu an’ lecture me an’ then you clam up?”

“I’m not clamming up.” Uryuu suddenly felt tired, as the full weight of everything began to sink in. “I’m just… there are a couple of things I’m not sure how to explain yet, that’s all.”

He slipped back under the covers, laying down.

“I’m going back to sleep.” He said frankly. “Tomorrow, we can talk. If there’s anything to talk about.”

“Dammit, Ishida…”

“I’m serious. I’m tired.” Uryuu cut across him. “My head is spinning with a thousand confusing things and I don’t really know which of them belong to me and which don’t, at the moment. Tomorrow, I guess I’m going to try and find that out — if it’s at all possible. I think it’s time that *I* tried to find this sword, if nothing else — I think if I did that, I might understand a lot better.”

“Shizuki’s sword?” Ichigo looked startled, and Uryuu nodded.

“I think so.” He agreed. “When I spoke to Kurotsuchi, he said something about having the sword, and that it would make a difference… so it must matter somehow.”

“Woah, hang on a minute.” Ichigo held up his hands, eyes widening in surprise. “When you spoke to Kurotsuchi? When did you do that?”

“Earlier on. When I went for a walk.”

“So that’s where you went?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

Ichigo sighed.

“You really are high maintenance sometimes, you know that?” He said wearily. “You think this guy’s the enemy, yet you go into his place without any way of takin’ him down… Ishida, what the hell were you thinking?”

“That you and Kuchiki-san were keeping secrets, and I needed to find some answers for myself.” Uryuu said primly.

“Fine. We won’t keep them any more.” Ichigo held up his hands in mock surrender. “But seriously… you don’t have any *reiryoku* right now. You can’t defend yourself if he attacks you — be more careful, huh?”

“Well, in the end it was only a conversation, so you needn’t worry.”

“You really are sure that Kurotsuchi guy is responsible for all this weird shit, aren’t you?”

“I was…” Uryuu faltered, remembering his interchange with the 12-Bantai Captain as his resolve wavered. “No, I’m pretty certain that he is. But… perhaps not in the same way as I was before. It’s hard to explain, Kurosaki. Just let it go, will you? Please. I don’t even understand myself, yet, so there’s no way I can make you get it.”

“Whatever.” Ichigo gave up, shrugging his shoulders as he settled back down to sleep. “If that’s how you feel.”

“It is.” Uryuu agreed firmly. “At the end of the day, Kurosaki, this is *my* problem. And dammit, I intend to solve it!”

The passageway was dark and narrow and, as Kira bent his head to duck under the splintered ends of a broken beam, he narrowed his eyes, trying to see clearly the way ahead. Behind him, he could hear his 3-Bantai subordinates struggling to keep up with his movements, and he halted for a moment, waiting impatiently for them to catch up.

It was late in the evening now, and Kira had had his men hard at work all day, examining the plans of their squad offices and searching in every corner, nook and cranny for any sign of anything out of the ordinary. It had taken several hours, even with the help of the diagrams currently spread out across Kira’s uncharacteristically

cluttered desk, but in the end, he had found something and, with Byakuya's words still ringing in his ears, he had decided that the best thing would be to investigate it at once.

He had not had much sleep in the past twenty four hours, yet somehow he did not feel tired, as if somehow the adrenalin of this quest had been keeping him going throughout. Some of his companions had begun to lag, however, and so Kira had pushed forward, determined to locate whatever they could before they reached the limit of their capabilities.

And so, that evening, he found himself navigating a tunnel deep within the bowels of the earth beneath 3-Bantai, four of his stronger squad members in tow.

Although the pathway was not an easy one to negotiate, and the sides of the passage were littered with chips of stone and pieces of damaged wood, the track itself was relatively clear, and Kira was smart enough to realise that this meant it had been in recent use. Although he had never known about it, he reflected bitterly, Ichimaru obviously had. From a seemingly innocent doorway into a seemingly dead end storage cupboard he had sought and he had found the secrets of 3-Bantai's past.

Or had he known already? Kira frowned, as a sudden thought assailed him.

Aizen had made copious plans, after all. Was it possible that this, too, had been part of his plan? Had he recommended Ichimaru for 3-Bantai's captaincy simply to have a man on the inside — a follower who would use the facilities already in existence to their best effect?

He frowned, shaking his head as if to clear it. None of that mattered now. Right now it was far more important for him to complete his mission — and ensure the safe delivery of any missing weapons to the 1-Bantai offices. He had already resolved to send word to Hitsugaya and Byakuya both if he succeeded in locating the weapons, before even considering how to move them. The weight of the responsibility weighed heavily on his mind, and he had long since decided that it would be better to leave that particular decision in the hands of the Captains.

"Kira-fukutaichou!"

At that moment, the grimy, out-of-breath squad members appeared, and Kira shot them a rueful smile, taking in their dusty *hakama* and exhausted expressions.

“I think we’re almost there.” Was all he said, however. “It’s quite a scramble down, but I don’t think it’s unsafe. We turn left again at the end of this tunnel — and then, if the plans are right, we should find a door and a chamber beyond. It’s that that I think we’re heading for.”

“You can remember all of that without having the plans in front of you, Fuku-taichou?” One of the men sounded surprised, and Kira nodded.

“Fortunately, I have a good memory for things like this.” He agreed. “It would be difficult to bring the plans down with us, after all — this tunnel isn’t really wide enough to be unfolding papers and studying diagrams. I’m fairly sure I’ve got it right, however. So it should be a little further.”

“How will we open the door, Fuku-taichou?” As they took the left turning, descending down a steep set of stairs even further into the bowels of Soul Society, one of the division’s young women asked apprehensively. “It will be locked, won’t it? After all, if there are things stored in there which are important…”

Kira nodded.

“Hopefully I’ll be able to take care of that.” He said evenly, his hand resting briefly on Wabisuke’s hilt as he did so. “In any case, that’s my problem to solve when we reach it.”

“But if this has been down here as long as this… will we be able to get the door open at all?” The woman asked, and Kira nodded.

“I think it was opened a lot more recently than people expect.” He said cryptically, and he was aware of his companions exchanging glances.

“You mean… Ichimaru-taichou?” One of the men whispered, and Kira nodded curtly.

“With every possibility, yes.” He said frankly, in a tone that did not invite further questions. “For the time being, however, we only need to worry about locating the vault and assessing the contents.”

He paused as they reached the end of the path, reaching out to touch the thick wood panels of a heavy-set door.

“And this is where we’re heading.” He murmured. “Though I’m sure it’s locked firmly, and I don’t have the key.”

He turned, gesturing for his four companions to step back against the wall.

“I don’t want anyone getting hurt.” He explained, as they gazed at him, confused. “I hope that it won’t cause any trouble, doing it like this — but in the absence of Ichimaru-taichou’s key, it will have to do.”

He pulled his sword from its resting place at his side, holding it firmly in his hand as he debated the dangers of releasing it in such a confined space. But there was no choice, he realised. In the absence of a key, it was all he had.

There’s not much room to swing you in here, Wabisuke. Let’s not decapitate anyone tonight, if you please.

Faintly he felt the prickle of the blade’s consciousness, as though his weapon had answered his request, and he nodded, his resolve set.

“*Omote o agero, Wabisuke*.” He murmured, as the blade glowed and twisted, warping its shape into its hooked Shikai form.

“Fuku-taichou, what are you…” The woman faltered, and Kira turned back towards his followers.

“I told you, make sure you’re well back.” He ordered. “I don’t want to be sending a runner to 4-Bantai as well because someone got hit by falling wood.”

“Falling…” One of the men’s eyes opened wide, but Kira ignored him, turning his attention back to the heavy, ancient door. Narrowing his eyes, he tightened his grip on Wabisuke’s hilt, then, deftly and quickly he brought the *zanpakutou*’s hooked blade down against the uneven, aged surface, slashing it time and time again.

At first, nothing happened. Then, with an almighty creak and groan, the door started to bow on its hinges, and Kira leapt back away from it just in time as the rusting pins that had swung the divide for centuries buckled and gave under the sudden extra weight. The door came crashing down in clouds of dust and splintered wood, and Kira shielded his gaze from the worst of it, struggling not to cough and choke as he caught the bulk of the blast head on.

“Fuku-taichou… did you really ought to have done that?” The man’s voice sounded awed, rather than worried, and Kira straightened up, dusting himself down as casually as he could muster.

“Is everyone all right?” He asked softly, and there were murmurs of assent.

“Then there’s no problem.” Kira nodded firmly, inwardly quelling any doubts or anxieties he might have about explaining to the Sou

Taichou his act of vandalism on a door more than ten times his own age. “We’ve gained entry. Follow me.”

With sudden purpose and resolve, he stalked forward through the arched doorway, stopping dead on the other side as he registered what he had walked into.

Although the tunnels outside the chamber had been aged and dusty, this chamber was impeccably clean and neat, as though it had only been abandoned in the past couple of months. It was a long room, with shelving that seemed to go on forever, and slowly Kira gazed around him, absorbing the vast quantity of long lost books, the cases and cabinets full of research items and the analysing units that flanked each side of a long, wood-finish desk.

So it had been true after all. 3-Bantai, whatever it had become, had once been the centre for research for Seireitei. Here, in this chamber, Captains from a time before even Ukitake and Kyouraku had worn the *haori* had gathered here, in this hidden place to discuss things in the secrecy and security of their own private cell. And Ichimaru had known about it — and he and his companions had used it.

Again Kira felt that this discovery had not been accidental, and that Aizen, whilst experimenting in Hollowfication and researching the Hougyoku, had wanted somewhere more safe to carry out his tests and his plotting. It had surely been for this reason that Ichimaru Gin had left his preferred position in 5-Bantai and become Captain of the Third. And it had been for *this* reason that he, Kira, had been made Ichimaru’s Vice Captain — for he was a Vice Captain who would follow orders and not ask questions that should not be asked.

Abarai-kun would have asked questions. That’s why, in the end, Aizen-taichou let him go. What if I’d asked more questions? Would Ichimaru-taichou have killed me? Or would he have dragged me into it so deeply that I wouldn’t have ever been able to scramble out?

This thought chilled him, and he only just managed to stifle a shiver.

“What on earth is this place?” The woman breathed, and Kira gathered his wits, remembering where he was.

“Just a chamber that was used for research, as far as I know.” He said dismissively. “I don’t suppose anything Ichimaru-taichou was working on with Aizen-taichou and Tousen-taichou will have been left here, so there’s no point us looking for it. Special Forces will do that, anyway, now the door’s been opened. Our brief is to find where the weaponry that went missing from Central 46 is located — and

whether or not any of it is here."

"Ichimaru-taichou really got into some deep shit, didn't he." One of the men said softly, his voice heavy with realisation, and Kira slowly nodded his head.

"For 3-Bantai's sake, it's best we disassociate from that as much as we can, though." He said evenly, hoping his true feelings did not show on his face. "Divide and search the room for anything you think might be what we're seeking. As far as I understand, all the weapons put into Central 46 storage were sealed in some way — so it might not be obvious at first glance what they are. Most importantly, though, we're looking for two confined *zanpakutou*. It's *very* important we ascertain their location — especially the one known as Hassuiryou."

"Ain't never heard of that one, Fuku-taichou." One of the men cast him a doubtful glance. "How will we know we've found it?"

"I believe it has a blue guard and a black and indigo hilt." Kira responded. "Eishoushi, I'm told, is a black katana with a snakeskin hilt. I don't know any more than that about their appearances, since they were both locked away before I was involved in the Gotei 13. You'll just have to look carefully, I'm afraid. I'll be looking too, though. It's vitally important that we find them, so don't leave any stone unturned."

At his word, the four Shinigami dispersed to separate corners of the room, and Kira, glad that at least his squad subordinates had not come to question his position returned Wabisuke to its dormant form, sliding it into its normal place at his side and turning his attention to the furthest end of the chamber, where the largest and longest of all the cabinets stood. To his surprise, it was not locked, but as he pulled back the door he soon realised why.

It was completely empty, and any notes that had ever been there were long gone.

I suppose there's still a chance that Ichimaru-taichou took the weapons, too. Although if Ukitake-taichou said they were sealed — why would they weigh themselves down with things they couldn't use? No, they must be here. There's nowhere else for them to be. They must be here.

"Fuku-taichou! I think I found something!" From the left, the young woman let out an excited cry, and Kira started, hurrying across to where she was sitting, clutching a tatty old notebook in her hands.

"Look, sir!" She said eagerly, holding out the old book as she did so. "All of the cabinets and units and everything in this room is

marked down in here. Everything that should be here — it's all catalogued. I don't know how old it is — it doesn't look like Ichimaru-taichou's writing, so maybe it's older than his time here. But…"

"But it's something to be going on." Kira took the volume carefully, setting it down on the desk as he gingerly turned the aged, yellow pages. "It is old, you're right. But I can still read it quite clearly. Good work."

"Thank you, sir." The woman grinned. "I'll keep looking. Maybe the swords we're searching for are listed somewhere in that, though!"

"It's certainly worth checking out." Kira agreed, turning the pages over again and again as he scanned the contents of the book. Despite its age and its wear and tear, he reflected, it was a comprehensive document. Though he had no way of knowing whether all the things listed inside it were still present inside the chamber, the sketched plans at the back illustrated much more clearly the organised nature of the room and how, when it had been in full use, everything had been properly filed and labelled so that everything was in its proper place. From studies on spirit particles to constructive alloys, there did not seem to be a single area of research that Soul Society's ancient squad members had not dipped into.

And, as Kira read through these notes from people gone long before his time, he realised that a good part of the Soul Society he now lived in was probably thanks to the meticulous nature of these unknown, nameless Shinigami.

"But it looks too old to mention swords from 200 years ago." He realised with a sigh, shutting it reluctantly and glancing around for a nearby squad member that he could utilise.

"Abei!" He called, and one of the men glanced up, looking at him quizzically.

Kira held out the book.

"Take this to 10-Bantai and give it to Hitsugaya-taichou… in person, if you don't mind." He said softly. "Tell him that one of our squad found it in a chamber deep beneath 3-Bantai and that I'm currently conducting a search for the missing swords as detailed in his original order. Tell him that we've located a chamber deep beneath 3-Bantai — and that if he likes to alert the Special Forces, I believe that it was probably in Ichimaru-taichou's use before he left Soul Society. I'll report to him in full tomorrow, unless we find the swords, in which case I'll send word at once. Don't hesitate, all right? You're the quickest, so I'm counting on you."

“Yes, sir.” Abei saluted, taking the book and carefully slipping it inside his *hakama*. “I’ll pass on the message exactly as you gave it.”

With that he was gone, and Kira sighed, running his fingers absently through his dust-covered hair.

“But we still have to find the swords.” He murmured, Byakuya’s words echoing through his head. “Especially Hassuiryou, before it causes all kinds of complications.”

For the next few hours, they worked in silence, meticulously examining every cabinet and case that they could in search of the missing weaponry. Most of them were not fastened, and many were missing sections of documentation which Kira had every suspicion had disappeared either to Hueco Mundo or been destroyed to prevent them falling into Seireitei’s hands. Still, as time wore on, he began to really wonder whether or not the swords had been taken from Soul Society, too. Though at odd intervals his companions had located elements from the full list of confiscated items that Kira had managed to view in the archives the other night, there was still no sign of the missing *zanpakutou*.

And then, quite by accident, something caught his eye.

A spider, building its web across the furthest corner of the chamber had been disturbed by the noise and dust, scuttling anxiously from one side of the back wall to the other and disappearing from view into what Kira had at first perceived to be just a crack in the wall. As he eyed it more closely, however, an exclamation left his lips and he hurried forwards, running his finger against it as he realised what it was.

“Minabe! Fujiyama! Come help me move this case!” He ordered, and at once the two squad Shinigami ceased what they were doing, hurrying to do as they were bidden.

“What have you found, Fuku-taichou?” Fujiyama asked eagerly, as between them the three of them slowly and carefully began to shunt the heavy cabinet away from the wall.

“A door, I think.” Kira responded, letting out his breath in a rush as they finally set it down. “That thing was heavy… I’m sure that it must’ve been put there deliberately, because I can’t imagine anyone moving it back and forwards on a regular basis.”

“There is a door here.” Minabe reported, surprise and respect in his dark gaze. “How did you know it was there, sir? I looked all over this area — even had the cabinet inside out — but I never saw a thing.”

“Thanks to a spider, actually.” Kira said absently, not noticing the bewildered looks his subordinates cast his way at the explanation. “I’m sure that this door was blocked for a reason though. And I’m sure that reason must be to conceal something people would want to get their hands on. Such as…”

“The *zanpakutou*?”

“Yes.”

Kira grasped the door catch in his fingers, giving it an experimental tug.

“Unsurprisingly, it’s locked.” He mused. “But… I wonder…”

He hesitated, then slid his hand into the sash of his *hakama*, pulling out the key that Hitsugaya had given him.

“I thought this might be a fake, since it looked so new.” He murmured, more than half to himself. “But this door looks like it was cut more recently than the rest of the chamber, too — and the lock is shinier than it should be, given the age of this room. Which means… maybe this key wasn’t just a planted dummy after all. Maybe it was to *this* — and Aizen-taichou didn’t mind if people saw it, because they’d never find the lock to which it matched up.”

He slipped the golden key into the lock, turning it and smiling in satisfaction as he heard it click.

“Bingo.” He muttered, pulling the door open, and stepping inside.

As he had expected, the chamber was small and fairly inconsequential. Yet, against opposing walls were two distinctive glass cases.

One bearing a silver blade with a blue guard and black and indigo hilt. And another, identical case bearing a long, sleek black katana, its own hilt in the patterns of a snake.

“Hassuiryou and Eishoushi.” He breathed, moving to stand so that he was exactly in between the two cases as triumph welled up inside of his heart. “We found them. They were here, after all.”

“Impressive work, Kira-fukutaichou.”

At the sound of the voice, Kira spun around, his heart almost stilling in his chest as he met Kurotsuchi’s golden eyes in the doorway of the little room. Behind him, Nemu was clearly visible, followed by a gaggle of oddly masked and robed 12-Bantai Shinigami, and instinctively Kira was on his guard, his gaze darting towards the

sealed *zanpakutou*.

“K… K… Kurotsuchi-taichou.” He managed at last, his fingers slipping towards Wabisuke’s hilt even though he knew he didn’t have the courage to raise his sword against one of the Gotei Captains. “Why… why are you here?”

“A little bird told me you’d found something interesting.” Kurotsuchi said casually, offering him a cool smile as he held up the worn old book, and Kira’s eyes widened in surprise and alarm as he registered the implication in the Captain’s words.

“But… Abei…”

“Oh, he’s quite all right.” Kurotsuchi said dismissively. “I was simply curious to see what had been found, and he didn’t really want to let me look. Of course, disobeying a Captain is never a good habit to have — so he’s reflecting on that lesson right now.”

Kira’s brows knitted together.

“I gave Abei the order to report to Hitsugaya-taichou and to give that over to his care.” He said softly. “He was obeying the orders he was given — that booklet doesn’t belong to any of us, but to Soul Society.”

“It probably has little interest to me, in any case.” Kurotsuchi dropped it down on the floor. “Since most of the theories in it seem to be outdated and no longer relevant. But you see, I didn’t want you informing anyone just yet of your little discovery. I wanted to take a look for myself… a nostalgic walk down memory lane, if you like. This is, after all, the very first Research Institute… is it not?”

“I… I suppose so.” Kira nodded, though he did not relax his stance for a moment, and Kurotsuchi let out an amused peal of laughter.

“You almost look ready to draw your *zanpakutou* on me, Kira-fukutaichou.” He said, dangerous intent in his voice. “Aside from being a suicidal act for a Vice Captain who hasn’t yet achieved Bankai, you are aware of the penalty of attacking a superior officer, I believe?”

“I haven’t any intention of drawing my sword, Kurotsuchi-taichou.” Kira said slowly. “But I have my orders and I have to follow them through. I understand your interest in this place, but it’s still potentially a crime scene. Ichimaru-taichou was almost certainly using this place, so Special Forces need to see it. And I got my initial assignment from Hitsugaya-taichou, so I have to complete that by making report to him. Please don’t try and prevent me from doing my

duty."

"You really are a by-the-book weak excuse for a Vice Captain." Kurotsuchi tut-tutted under his breath. "And I thought I was about to see a flare of spirit from you at last. At least, even if it meant I had to dissect you, if you had drawn your sword it would have proven you had something inside of you worth seeing. But I suppose not. I suppose Ichimaru really did have a wet blanket for a sidekick, after all."

"Kurotsuchi-taichou! Please don't say such things about Kira-fukutaichou!" As Kira flushed red, Minabe darted forward, indignation on his face. "Ichimaru-taichou abandoned 3-Bantai. Kira-fukutaichou hasn't done that, even though things have been difficult since then. He's not a weak Vice Captain!"

"Minabe's right." Fujiyama agreed. "Kira-fukutaichou's been holding this squad together since Ichimaru-taichou left, even despite all the bad things people have said about him and about 3-Bantai in general. It's thanks to Kira-fukutaichou that we managed to find this place, after all. Please don't say things about him, sir. 3-Bantai don't consider him anything but our proper Vice Captain."

"A Vice Captain, perhaps… though far from a Captain." Kurotsuchi was unmoved. "Still, it doesn't matter either way. This is a worthless conversation, after all. I came here for a specific reason and I'm wasting valuable study time."

He raised his hand, flicking his fingers in their direction.

"Nemu, if you please."

"Yes, Mayuri-sama." Nemu bowed her head, taking a step into the doorway. For a moment she met Kira's gaze, and the 3-Bantai Vice Captain almost thought he saw an apology in the depths of her strange eyes. Then she opened her hand, clapping her palms together as the room began to fill with a strange smelling, potent smoke. Kira, who was closest to her, was immediately inundated with the odd, alluring odour, and as it seared through his lungs his eyes opened wide with alarm, recognising too late the Captain's plans for sabotage.

"Get out of here!" As the first spots of dizziness began to pierce through his brain, Kira lunged forward, pushing Minabe and Fujiyama towards the door of the chamber. "It's knock out gas — get away from here before it takes over your whole system!"

"Ooh, you are perceptive." Kurotsuchi chuckled, looking amused. "But you underestimate my science, Kira-fukutaichou. It's not any

ordinary knockout gas. As I'm sure you'll find out, when it's had a little more time to penetrate your system."

Despite himself, Kira stumbled, struggling to keep his balance as the drug began to dig into his nerves and muscles, making them feel foreign to his own body. As he grasped hold of the door-frame to steady himself, he saw the young woman from his squad lying unconscious on the floor, a bruise across her brow, and he gazed at Kurotsuchi in horror.

"What… have… you…?"

"She's taking a short nap." Kurotsuchi said carelessly. "I'd not worry about her too much, Kira-fukutaichou. Just a small headache, nothing more. I'm not in the mood to kill your little followers — that would be messy and totally unnecessary."

Kira's gaze darted to the door, relief piercing through him as he registered that although Minabe had stumbled short of the exit, Fujiyama was nowhere to be seen. Inwardly he prayed that all of Kurotsuchi's followers were currently inside the vault. That caused another thought to cross his mind, and he stared at the Captain in alarm.

"What did you… do to… my squad?"

"*Your* squad, are they?" Kurotsuchi seemed to be taking pleasure from watching the odd, dizzy poison seep slowly into the Vice Captain's system, for despite his own claims about wasting time, he seemed in no hurry to leave the chamber. "They're currently experiencing the same kind of feeling you are, only a little more advanced."

He crossed the room and, as Kira's legs wobbled and gave up beneath him, Kurotsuchi's thin, claw-like hands had grabbed him, holding him firmly.

"Don't worry. You'll sleep soon, too." He said reflectively. "I can't guarantee what dreams you might have, however… this potion does tend to have some hallucinogenic qualities. You might find you feel a little… shall we say… hungover when you wake up?"

Kira opened his mouth to ask Kurotsuchi why he had come to 3-Bantai at all, but as he did so, a wave of nausea overwhelmed him, and instead he retched, as the whole of the chamber seemed to spin and twist around him.

"Now, that's just not nice." Kurotsuchi scolded him lightly. "Although your *reiryoku* must be greater than I thought. You haven't

collapsed as quickly as I expected… oh well. You live and learn, as they say."

Kira closed his eyes, no longer capable of putting together a coherent sentence, and as he felt his consciousness seeping out of him, Kurotsuchi released his hold, letting the Vice Captain fall to the ground with a thud.

"Is it done, Nemu?" Kira heard him ask, and Nemu's soft response,

"Yes, Mayuri-sama."

Then, blackness hurtled in from every side of his consciousness, and he knew no more.

Author's note: Zanpakutou etc

Phew. Busy chapter. Introducing Hassuiryou properly at long last. Plus, Shihouin's Eishoushi. The true story of 200 years ago, so far as it goes. And… foul play in 3-Bantai. There's something new (not)!

A quick rundown for anyone not Japanese-cognisant, or just plain confused about the two invented zanpakutou in this chapter ;) I decided it was better to keep the releases and stuff in Japanese (although I may have twitched Kanji here and there, it basically works I think) because I have never seen or read Bleach's English translation and have no clue how they're translated or if they even are in those versions.

Hassuiryou *（八水龍）'s name means 'Eight Water Dragons'. It's also known as the Rain Dragon (Ame no Ryuu).*
To release it, Ametatsu uses the command, "Fure" which means (in this context), Rain.
His Shikai attacks are "Ryuu no Baratsuki" (Scattering of the Dragon) and "Ryuu no Arashi" (Dragon's Storm).
His Bankai is "Suiryou Utenshin" (Water Dragon: Rain God Of The Heavens). The Bankai dragon has two principle forms of attack (as well as its own versions of Baratsuki and Arashi) which are Chuusui o shiro (make it flood) and Kuekorose (bite to death).

Eishoushi *（影囁死)s name means "Shadowed Whisper of Death"*
To release it, Shihouin uses the command "Musube" (Stifle).
He also has the option to create a shield with the command "Kakumae" (Shelter).
His Bankai is Eishoushi Ja-Henshin (Shadowed Whisper of Death: Snake Transformation)

Anything else about the swords and their modes of attack is hopefully clear in the chapter. (You know, it's really not so easy dreaming up

zanpakutou for Captain level Shinigami. Kudos, Kubo-sensei, yet again).

By the way, noone's asked this yet, but there is a reason why Ametatsu was Captain of 10-Bantai. I won't spell it out, exactly… just that the Japanese number 10 "juu" looks like this: 十. I wonder what ***other*** *familiar Bleach symbol looks something like that…??*

Chapter Nineteen: Ukitake's Confession

Chapter Nineteen: Ukitake’s Confession

“I know that look, Kisuke.”

As Yoruichi dropped down from the top of the cupboard, flicking her tail to remove the dust it had acquired from her inconvenient hiding place, Urahara glanced up from where he had been going over a series of scraps of paper, a questioning expression in his pale eyes. It was early in the morning, and he had been up since before dawn, building up an ever increasing mess of notes and diagrams as he struggled to piece together the solution to his problem. A mug of Tessai’s steaming tea stood in the midst of the melee, like an island in a sea of paper, and for a moment Urahara gazed at it, a rueful grimace touching his features as he realised how little progress he had so far made.

“It’s the look of a man who’s after something that’s just outside of his grasp.” Yoruichi continued now, padding across the chamber to join him. “And a man who’s not had enough sleep.”

“Sometimes sleep is overrated.” Urahara reflected, letting out a heavy sigh. “Did you manage to make any contact with 2-Bantai, by the way?”

“That’s hard to do from on top of your cupboard, even in a shop like this.” Yoruichi said wryly. “No. I haven’t heard back from Soi Fon yet… though there’s every chance she doesn’t know much about the boys’ progress. Still, I’ll try again later on.”

She leapt up onto the table, pawing the edge of one of the sheets of paper.

“What’s this? Still trying to find a way of quickening entrance to Soul Society?”

“Yes.” Urahara grimaced, pushing the documents aside. “There are three or four ways of handling it, too. But I’m on the wrong side of the fence to activate any of them. Unless I’m within Soul Society, there’s nothing I can do to speed the transference up. We’d need certain boxes to be ticked on the other side before I could even begin to start any kind of processes here. I’ve also got limited spiritual equipment at the Shouten in contrast to what I had before. It’s a pity. I have a feeling that time is against us.”

“You think so too?” Yoruichi frowned. “Even so, if there’s nothing you can do, there’s nothing you can do. You’re a long way from being 12-Bantai’s Captain now, Kisuke. At least this time you’re not trying to do it without Soul Society discovering your motives. It should be a little faster, shouldn’t it, on account of that?”

“It should be.” Urahara rubbed his temples. “But even so…”

“I think you’re worried about them.” Yoruichi reflected, and Urahara shot her a rueful glance.

“I think I am, too.” He owned. “It’s a worrying sign, don’t you think?”

“No… not necessarily.” Yoruichi shook her head. “There’s something about them… about the both of them, in fact… that’s worth preserving. But they’re still young enough to throw their lives away foolishly. I know you and your projects, Kisuke. This is no different. You like odd and unusual things — that’s why you released Kurotsuchi and were able to manage him so effectively.”

“I wouldn’t put Kurosaki-san and Ishida-san in the same category as Mayuri.” Despite himself Urahara laughed. “But I take your point. Still…”

He frowned, glancing at his old friend pensively.

“You’ve noticed it too, haven’t you? The changes in Kurosaki-san’s reiatsu?”

“Yes.” Yoruichi admitted. “And in Soul Society, I wondered about it, too. At the time… well, desperate times drew desperate measures out of him. But even so…”

“The transformation is probably too far gone for me to prevent, even if I had access to the Hougyoku.” Urahara sighed, shrugging his shoulders. “The irony of it being that Aizen, who experimented so much on Hollowfication, apparently managed to miss a budding Vaizard when it stood right before him.”

“Have you spoken to Ichigo about it?”

“There’s not much I can tell him without delving into other things, so no.” Urahara shook his head. “Besides — it’s not down to me if it really is the case that he’s shifting over that line into something else. I’m not the one who should teach him.”

Yoruichi’s eyes narrowed to near slits.

“Do you think… *they’ll* come for him?”

“Almost certainly, if I know Hiyori.” Urahara said wryly. “Yes, I imagine they will. But it remains to be seen whether they can make any use out of him. He’s changed so much in such a short time, but there’s only so much strain a soul can take. I’m hopeful that we might make Aizen regret his oversight in not realising what Ichigo was on the verge of becoming. Vaizard are tremendously powerful beings, after all. But the sacrifices to get to that point are high. And in the meantime, the boy’s not entirely in control of his power. So if something happens in Soul Society… there’s no guaranteeing what might occur.”

“You possibly should have considered that before sending them, but it’s done now.” Yoruichi said matter-of-factly. “In the meantime, all we can do is what we can do here.”

“True enough.” Urahara agreed. “I…”

He faltered, a frown crossing his features as he met the cat’s golden gaze with a startled one of his own.

“Did you just feel that?”

“Yes.” Yoruichi nodded, consternation touching her own expression. “That’s an interesting development — I wonder what he wants.”

“You’re a cat, and I don’t think it would do the reputation of my shop any good if you were to become a naked woman instead.” Urahara got to his feet, shooting his companion a playful smile. “So I’ll go down there and see what the situation is. I doubt it’s trouble, so you can take your time in changing… all right?”

“It’s a rare event either way.” Yoruichi acknowledged. “All right. I’ll meet you here in a few minutes. And I’ll tell your entourage to stay out of the way, too. Whatever the purpose of this visit, the less fuss we make over it the better.”

Urahara nodded, pulling back the trap door that led down to the expansive training chamber below.

“In a few, then.” He said cheerfully, dropping through the hole and clambering nimbly down the long ladder that hung beneath.

As he dropped down onto the sand, he caught sight of the flicker of a white *haori*, and he straightened himself up, dusting his jacket absently as he tipped his hat playfully in the direction of his visitor.

“This is a rare surprise… to have a visitor from Soul Society is unusual enough, but for someone of Captain’s class to make the trip is

almost unheard of." He said lightly. "You should be careful, though — making communication with a Soul Society exile might be perceived as a crime, Ukitake-taichou."

Ukitake eyed him for a moment, then he grinned, shaking his head slowly.

"Your clothes might be different, and I can no longer sense your reiatsu in the same way, but you really haven't changed much in a century, have you, Urahara?" He said softly.

"Nor you." Urahara agreed. "To what do I owe the honour of your visit?"

"Ah." Ukitake frowned. "Well, on account of a promise I gave a member of my squad, in fact. You're familiar, I think, with Kuchiki Rukia?"

"More than a little bit, yes, in various ways." Urahara agreed genially.

"It was your gate, I think, through which Ishida-kun and Ichigo-kun came to Soul Society in the first place?" Ukitake asked. "I assumed that it would be, although I suppose…"

"It was." Urahara nodded. "In the circumstances, it seemed to be the only thing to do."

"Indeed." Ukitake pursed his lips. "Then I'll come directly to the point. I know that you're trying to open the Gate to allow Inoue-san and Sado-kun to re-enter Soul Society, correct?"

"Yes." Urahara agreed. "Though it's taking longer than I'd like."

"Well, that's why I came. To help speed things along." Ukitake said honestly. "Because, on some reflection, I think it's the best solution. I've spoken to the Sou Taichou and he granted me permission to come here and act in this way — although I would have probably come in any case. Urahara, I'm worried about the boy. The Quincy. Very worried, if I'm honest. After thinking over Kuchiki's report for some hours… I don't think that we can waste any time in acting."

"So you think that Sado-san and Inoue-san's admission to Soul Society is imperative?" Urahara looked intrigued. "Has something happened, then, that I don't know about?"

"I have heard that Ishida-kun has created occasional disturbances, but nothing beyond the control of our people." Ukitake shook his head. "No… it's not that. And even if I do use my *reiryoku* to speed up the gate's unlock process, Urahara, it will only be enough for one

person to get through. I came here to get Inoue Orihime — if at all possible."

"*Just* Inoue-san?" Urahara stared, and Ukitake nodded his head.

"I'm right, I think, when I say that Ishida-kun referred to her as 'Niji'?" He asked softly. Urahara nodded.

"You've got my attention piqued now." He admitted. "Come upstairs, and have some tea? We can talk further there — plus, you really don't look that well, if you want my honest appraisal. I'd almost think you'd done something irresponsible and reckless such as abandoned your sickbed to run to the rescue of these bad children."

Ukitake looked rueful.

"Soul Society misses you, sometimes." He reflected. "Especially now Aizen has been unmasked. I wonder…"

"No, my place is here." Urahara held up his hands. "I'm freer here than I was there. And I still broke many rules, Ukitake-san. I didn't do everything I've been accused of, maybe — but that's long in the past and can't be changed. Thanks to my inventing whims, the Hougyoku exists and Aizen has it in his possession. There's no scope for me to come back to Soul Society in any capacity."

"Well, if at the very least you'll accept communication with the Gotei-13, that will have to suffice." Ukitake sighed, rubbing his temples. "All right. I'll come upstairs for a while. The truth is I *am* tired out from coming here — it was a last minute decision, after I began to realise how much was at stake. All day yesterday and much of the night before, I went through everything that I could find in the archives about soul reconstitution and other like matters. In the end, the only option was to go speak to Genryuusai-sensei and ask his permission to come to the Real World. I've come to a conclusion that frightens me… which is why I want Inoue-san so badly."

"You almost sound like Kyouraku-taichou, speaking like that." Urahara said casually, and Ukitake snorted, shaking his head.

"This is a serious matter, Urahara." He said chidingly. "Potentially, a very serious one. It suggests that all kinds of natural orders have been tampered with… and if we're going to find a way to un-tamper with them…"

"You need Inoue Orihime?" Urahara raised an eyebrow. Ukitake shook his head.

"I think Ishida-kun may, though." He responded, as he followed the

former Captain up into the main level of the shop, pausing at the top to catch his breath. “I’m too old for things like that, you know.”

“Then please, take a seat.” Urahara gestured to the table. “And we’ll talk further.”

Ukitake did as he was bidden, sinking down on one of the cushions and Urahara reached across to pour tea, pushing one of the mugs over towards his companion.

“Now, what exactly has you so concerned that you’ve come to the Real World in person?” He asked softly, and Ukitake nodded, resting his elbows on the wooden surface.

“You know about Shizuki Ametatsu?” He asked, and Urahara’s eyes narrowed.

“The invisible Captain, or so it seems?”

“That’d be an apt analogy, since he was more or less removed from recorded history after the incident.”

“And the ‘incident’ being…?” Urahara frowned. “I don’t know a lot of detail, sadly. On account of his having been erased — I suppose it was a need-to-know kind of situation.”

“Shizuki Ametatsu was a Captain who was sent to this world to negotiate with the Quincy. Instead, he fell in love with one of them. Ishida Niji.” Ukitake ran his finger absently around the rim of the tea mug. “When one of the other Captains overreached his orders and decided to kill all of the Quincy, the girl was cut down and Shizuki took his revenge by slaying first the Special Forces, then their Captain. A man called Shihouin Hirohito — an ancestor of Yoruichi’s.”

He glanced around him.

“Is she here, by the way? I was sure I felt her reiatsu when I arrived.”

“She is… and she’ll join us soon.” Urahara nodded. “Then that explains, somewhat, why his death was also so badly recorded. It seemed like a cover-up at work… are you saying, basically, that Shihouin Hirohito played God with the Quincy and Shizuki Ametatsu played Jury with him as a result?”

“Pretty much.” Ukitake nodded. “It was a… a bad affair. In lots of ways. People wanted it closed as quickly as possible, and the Shihouin clan wanted themselves absolved of any blame. Most of it fell on Shizuki’s head instead, though Hirohito’s sword was confiscated as part of the agreement, and sealed away. That part of it I know little

about. However, Shizuki Ametatsu was a former Vice Captain of mine — and before that, a ranked member of 13-Bantai for many years. For that reason, I attempted to speak for him."

He sighed, looking troubled.

"I do not condone perverting justice." He murmured. "But justice in this case had already been warped beyond recognition by the wolves in the Shihouin ranks. It's no defence, I realise, but even so… I did the only thing I could see to do. I decided that I would do what I could for him, no matter what."

"No matter what?" Urahara was curious, and Ukitake nodded.

"I admit it, I deliberately stood before Central 46's court, swore an oath of truth and then lied." He said heavily. "It was the only way I could see to help at all. In order that his soul was not completely obliterated, I pleaded that he was out of his mind when he committed the murder of Shihouin Hirohito. When Shizuki came back to Soul Society after the fight, you see, it was me he came to. And I told them that I was certain he had quite lost his wits. My squad members backed me up, judging by the hysterical state in which he arrived. Given that fact, one mercy was allowed him. His soul was not destroyed. However, his memories were severed and removed, and a large part of his *reiryoku* — in the form of the sword, Hassuiryou — was sealed and locked away in a secure location. Then his corpse was dispersed as spiritual matter to be reborn, in time, in the Real World."

"His reiryoku was not cut completely, then?" Urahara looked interested, and Ukitake shook his head.

"It was not deemed necessary, if the memories were no longer there to guide the soul's actions." He said heavily. "Although I admit that that, too, was down to me using every scrap of influence and pressure I had at my disposal when it came to the sentencing council. It was not easy… even posthumously, the Shihouin were quite hostile towards any effort to rehabilitate Shizuki or show him any leniency. But sometimes longevity pays off. Also, Kuchiki Ginrei — who had been present through much of what had happened prior to Shihouin's death — backed my appeal. With the support of the Kuchiki-ke, it turned the scale. In the end, unusual as it was, we succeeded."

"It sounds like you abused your position left, right and centre for the sake of this Shizuki." Urahara pursed his lips. "I must admit, I'm surprised — not just to hear such a confession from one with your stellar reputation, but that — even given it's some time since the event — you'd so easily tell me about it. Are you so sure you can trust me?"

“Yes.” Ukitake looked rueful. “Besides, Soul Society’s justice system is something you have fallen foul of yourself. I felt confident that, if I told you everything, you’d be able to put it into context.”

“Even considering my connection with the current head of the Shihouin family?”

“Yoruichi left Soul Society and her family to back you up, because she believed in you over Central 46’s justice.” Ukitake said quietly. “I have no fear of her or repercussions from the Shihouin on account of anything I say here today.”

“I see.” Urahara sent his companion a wry smile. “Then you’ve thought this all out in a lot of detail before coming, after all.”

“I have.” Ukitake nodded. “And I’m not just here because of the memory of a dead officer.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“As I said, he was treated with mercy, because I fought hard to ensure that it was so.” He continued. “Only the element of his power which related to the summoning of his sword was properly confined. In essence, to prevent him from easily regaining Shinigami powers… not necessarily from having spiritual power.”

“I see where this is going.” Urahara’s eyes became near slits beneath the brim of his striped hat. “You believe that soul has re-taken human form now, and that that human form is…”

“The boy, Ishida Uryuu.” Ukitake nodded. “Precisely.”

“With his *reiryoku* modified, he couldn’t be a Shinigami so easily as, say, Kurosaki-san has managed to be. But he still had *reiryoku,* so instead he was born a Quincy, without even knowing how the wheels turned.” Urahara rubbed his stubbled chin. “Fate is interesting, sometimes.”

“Or cruel, depending on your viewpoint.” Ukitake said acidly. He sighed, spreading his hands.

“I was quite unwell following these events, so I suppose I lost track of what happened next.” He admitted sadly. “When I recovered enough to take an interest, the matter had been shelved. They were already discussing new Captain appointments for 2-Bantai and 10-Bantai, and I decided it was as well to let matters lie. However…”

“However, you think that everything you’ve just unburdened yourself of connects directly to what’s been happening to Ishida-san, don’t you?” Urahara’s eyes glittered with comprehension. “I see. And

you feel to blame for it in some way…?”

“You’ve grasped my meaning perfectly.” Ukitake rubbed his temples, looking weary. “I haven’t spoken of this inside the Gotei-13, since I’m aware that it might ruffle feathers to do so — mentioning a Captain who is largely obliterated from history, questioning official accounts that I helped to create in some way or another. I’m not afraid of being disciplined for my deception — after all, it’s an old case, and the people who were directly involved are all dead now, save for Genryuusai-sensei himself. I believe he’d understand, considering that he saw Shizuki that night as sure as I did. Still… it may cause ripples, and so I have so far kept my silence.”

He shrugged.

“You are the only person I have told — other than Kyouraku — that I deceived Central 46 in regards to Shizuki’s sanity.” He added. “But he was my Vice Captain, Urahara. He was a man I respected — and more, his feelings I understood. So I did the only thing I could do for him. Even at that cost.”

“And the only explanation remains that that soul has cycled round to the Real World and taken a new form…? You don’t think there could be another way of interpreting Ishida-san’s recent behaviour?”

“I don’t.” Ukitake said heavily. “And even the investigative scientist in you must see that it’s the only explanation, Urahara. Kuchiki believed that Ishida-kun was possessed, but I think this unlikely. Byakuya also negated it as a possibility, and I see no reason to refute his judgement either. Yet from everything Kuchiki said, there is only that one other explanation. It was that subject I spent time researching in the archives, and it led me to a single conclusion. I wholeheartedly believe Ishida Uryuu has Shizuki Ametatsu’s soul. There is no doubt in my mind.”

“But reincarnation of scattered souls in itself is not abnormal. Even if it is true — and it would explain the boy’s native spiritual skill — it shouldn’t create any problems.”

“No…” Ukitake agreed. “So long as the memories that were severed from Shizuki’s soul remained severed. The trouble is…”

“The trouble is that the Quincy fight by absorbing spirit particles to fire their bows.” Urahara’s expression became serious. “And discarded memories are also, in essence, dormant spirit particles that wind up used in construction and other unchanging structures. So, by coming to Soul Society, Ishida-san may well have picked up more than a few burns and bruises. Coupling that with the fact his current power

drought is on account of his own native *reiryoku* being sealed away as a Quincy failsafe, as opposed to having been completely ripped out of his body… there's no reason why a *Shinigami* in possession of that body would not be able to make full use of those powers. Especially now, with him in the form he is. And if he was to obtain the *zanpakutou* as well… he would have gained the last of Shizuki's sealed *reiryoku* and the transformation may well become complete."

His lips thinned.

"Now that you put it in that way, I can see only too clearly how something like that could happen." He admitted ruefully. "I may have confessions of my own to make, Ukitake-san. One of the things my Bureau of Technology began to investigate during its early years involved experimentation on dormant spirit matter. More specifically, the re-animation of said spirit matter. It was thought that there may be secrets locked away in the memory matter of these ancient specimens that may somehow benefit present day Seireitei. And I won't pretend we were at all discriminatory in the range or quantity of samples we took and examined. Or, for that matter, discarded when it seemed we had failed. Although we managed to, shall we say, reanimate some of these samples, taking it to the level of being able to use it proved tricky."

He sighed.

"In truth, I never presided over an experiment that could have been called a success — not even when I used myself as the test subject." He admitted ruefully. "But then, it wasn't a study I ever saw to complete conclusion. That doesn't mean it wasn't concluded after my exile was decided."

"That's the other reason for my coming to you over anyone else, to be truthful." Ukitake confessed. "Aside from the fact you no longer have Gotei-13 shackles, and therefore are more objective than anyone else who might be able to help. A short time ago, Kyouraku and I got the impression Kurotsuchi was working on something new — that he had that air that he was up to something. Kyouraku saw books in his laboratory relating to spirit matter and transference, which would be in keeping with what you just said, I believe. Also, he showed particular interest in the Quincy boy returning to Soul Society. I've not been in full health, so I've not been paying as much attention as I perhaps could or should have. But it has occurred to me…"

"That Mayuri is somehow using this whole situation to his advantage, and experimenting with the boy's spirit?"

“Something like that.” Ukitake acknowledged. “But without proof, that’s something else I can’t say inside of Soul Society. Still, you know Kurotsuchi on several levels none of us probably do. What do you think the chances are of his involvement?”

Urahara pursed his lips, remembering his heated exchange with Uryuu the night the boys had left.

“I think that there’s a high probability he’s involved.” He admitted at length. “Though I don’t think he began it — I would imagine him to be enough of an opportunist to take a chance when it’s laid before him. Besides, Ishida-san already said he felt like he was being watched by Mayuri’s Vice Captain, Nemu. I think you’re probably right in all respects, Ukitake-san.”

“I was afraid I might be.” Ukitake sighed heavily. “In which case, of course, I’ll have to do what I can to help the boy out. If he really does have Shizuki’s spirit inside of him…”

“He’s his own self, first and foremost.” Urahara pointed out. “And a Quincy, even if he was once a Shinigami. He has a lot of pride… you might find it hard, if you intend to try and protect him. Even from Mayuri. I think he considers that his fight, even now.”

“I only know the lad in passing.” Ukitake admitted. “But from that, he sounds like Shizuki all the more. Still, if Kurotsuchi is interfering — he might have no choice but to accept help.”

Urahara’s expression became serious.

“Shizuki Ametatsu is dead.” He murmured. “You realise that nothing will change that? Ishida Uryuu is Ishida Uryuu — no more, no less. We can’t bring back the dead, no matter how much we might like to. No matter what Mayuri does, even he can’t do that.”

“You don’t understand.” Ukitake shook his head. “I don’t want to bring Shizuki back. He went to his death knowing that it would bring him oblivion. That was what he wanted, and even though it grieves me, I wouldn’t take that right from him. He did what he believed in, as we all have to do. No. What worries me more is that Shizuki’s memories and powers being reawakened mean that that boy is suffering on two levels. My desire is to eradicate Shizuki completely from Ishida-kun’s mind and body before it goes too far to be changed back. I want to preserve Ishida Uryuu’s identity and individuality. Not breathe new life into a long dead subordinate.”

“Then we understand each other.” Urahara looked relieved. “Though I shouldn’t have underestimated your judgement, Ukitake-

san. Even a century on, I can tell you think things through as thoroughly as ever."

"Perhaps too thoroughly." Ukitake looked rueful. "Though I hope that, before I leave, we'll have time to discuss the science of reincarnation and your experimentations in some more detail. Even if it was a century ago, Urahara… I'm sure there must be plenty you remember about Soul Society's science and the kind of thing we're most likely dealing with where Kurotsuchi is concerned. Whether or not it is appropriate for me to ask for it, I would dearly like your help."

"I'm no longer answerable to the Gotei-13, you know." Urahara's eyes twinkled beneath the brim of his hat, and Ukitake smiled.

"But you have a vested interest in those children." He said comfortably. "Even if you'd like to claim otherwise. And besides, it is your fault that 13-Bantai is currently without one of its members — correct? Kuchiki Rukia's current physical condition is, after all, down to your having used her as a hiding place for your contraband invention."

Urahara laughed, nodding his head.

"Touche." He said good-naturedly. "All right. I won't pretend that I'd automatically help anyone from Soul Society just on their asking me, but in your case, I'll make an exception. Besides, you are right. I suppose it does concern me, what those kids get up to over there. They're surprisingly strong, really — considering."

"Mm." Ukitake agreed. "The Kurosaki boy especially."

"He has a certain amount of, shall we say, native talent." Urahara agreed casually, and Ukitake nodded.

"But it isn't just him." He responded. "Come the Winter, Urahara, they will all no doubt be of as much help as anyone in Seireitei."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"And you, also." He added. "If you choose to fight. I'm sure Benihime misses her chance in the limelight, you know — I remember that she was quite a sword, once upon a time."

"She hasn't lost any of her beauty or her bite." Urahara assured him. His expression became grave, as he glanced down at the cane at his side.

"Besides, I may be unwanted in Soul Society, but I have no reason to side with Aizen Sousuke." He said matter-of-factly. "You needn't

worry, Ukitake-san. I might not fight for the Gotei-13 — but I *will* fight for the things that matter most."

"As will we all." Ukitake responded. "I did tell Genryuusai-sensei that I intended to come and speak to you directly, by the way — although I didn't say precisely what about. He's always been somewhat against anyone from Seireitei making contact with you — but since Aizen's betrayal was made clear, a lot of people have relaxed their opinion of you. That you find your life here freer, I don't doubt… but I also think that there are wounds and rifts with Soul Society that you might yet be able to repair. And there are those of us among the Gotei captaincy who would welcome that move wholeheartedly."

"You, perhaps. Kyouraku-taichou, maybe." Urahara shrugged dismissively. 'Few others. It's all right.' As Ukitake opened his mouth to protest. "Like I said, I don't belong there any more. But come the Winter, I'll know what I need to do. And so will my ever-enterprising young protegees. Don't you worry about that."

"I don't think I ever doubted it." Ukitake sat back on his heels. "Though I'm glad to hear you say it. And here's Yoruichi," As the door of the chamber slid back to reveal the former Captain, now returned to her human form and neatly dressed.

"I didn't expect you to come all the way here, Ukitake." Yoruichi returned his smile, dropping gracefully down opposite. "Is this a mission of mercy?"

"It is." Ukitake nodded. "I'll let Urahara fill you in on the details. But for now, I want Inoue Orihime… if at all possible."

"The girl is in school." Yoruichi pursed her lips. "Why so urgently?"

"Because Ukitake-san believes that it would be beneficial for Ishida-san to have her nearby." Urahara said softly. Yoruichi's eyes widened in surprise.

"Beneficial…?" She repeated. "You can't tell me the boy has collapsed into a gibbering wreck, because I won't believe it!"

"Pardon me?" Ukitake looked mystified, and Urahara laughed at his expression.

"Ishida-san has, shall we say, a certain fondness for Inoue-san." He said lightly. "Although he… he prefers to keep it to himself."

"Really." Ukitake's expression became pensive. "Then that would explain why Shizuki chose her for his Niji. I did wonder about that… but if the soul is still confused about whose memories and will it

should be following, it would cling hold of the one thing that was for sure. If Ishida-kun harbours that kind of emotion for Inoue-san, it would tally with Shizuki's love for Niji. Maybe bringing her to Soul Society is a risk, after all — but I'm hopeful that, if she is there, if we have a situation, she might be able to talk him down."

"You think there will be a situation, don't you?" Urahara said sharply, and Ukitake nodded.

"Call it old man's intuition, but I'm certain of it." He said grimly. "I would not have come here for any less reason."

"It sounds like there's a lot to fill me in on." Yoruichi reflected. "But if it's so urgent you have the girl, then leave it to me. If you can wait a little while, Ukitake, I'll go and get her myself. Noone will notice me, after all, if I go in the guise of a cat."

"Thank you." Ukitake sounded relieved. "I have clearance from Soul Society and Genryuusai-sensei to bring her back with me. But it will need my *reiryoku* as well as yours, Urahara, to override the usual limits on soul transfer. In order to speed up the process and allow her through without harming her — are you willing to do that?"

"I'm fine about it." Urahara shrugged. "The question is, are you? You've not said it, but even though I'm not a Captain now, I can still feel fluctuations in reiatsu and *reiryoku*. Yours is all over the place already — do you really think you're up to firing a Gate in the way you're suggesting?"

"That's a foolish question." Ukitake said matter-of-factly. "This is my affair. It was my affair two centuries ago, when Shizuki came to the Real World. It was my affair when he shed blood, then fled back to Soul Society. It was my affair when I wasn't able to talk him out of going to his death against Genryuusai-sensei. And it was my affair when I gave the evidence I did to Central 46's posthumous tribunal. It's always been my affair, Urahara. And I'll see it through. For the sake of that young boy's life — you have to realise that. I won't let him be warped by the pain and grief of someone who died two hundred years ago. He's still far too young to bear those burdens — and I won't allow it."

"You might as well save your breath, Kisuke." Yoruichi said wisely. "Talking Ukitake out of something once he's made up his mind is near enough impossible."

"Then I suppose there's nothing else for it but to send Inoue-san across with you to Soul Society." Urahara shrugged. "Yoruichi-san, if you please. Ukitake-san and I will do our best to finish preparations

here… we'll be ready to go when you get back here."

"Kira!"

Kira opened his eyes, wishing immediately that he had not done so as he blinked and struggled to focus against the swirling mass of lights and colours that seemed determined to pierce right through to the heart of his senses. Somewhere in the haze above, he knew someone was speaking to him, but his head felt like someone had let a thunderstorm loose inside of it, and he swallowed hard, feeling sick and dizzy.

"Kira, dammit, say something, will you?"

Now he recognised the voice, and he blinked several times, bringing the world into a blurry focus.

"Abarai-kun?" He managed, and Renji sighed, sinking down at his side. Behind him, Kira could make out the stiff, unreadable form of the 6-Bantai captain, and confusion flooded through him. Why was Kuchiki-taichou there? What had happened? And why did he feel like he'd been trampled into the dust by 11-Bantai on manoeuvre?

"Shit, you know how to scare people." Renji said darkly, an accusing look in his dark eyes. "What were you playing at, Kira? Treasure hunting in hidden chambers beneath 3-Bantai?"
Treasure-hunting?

Kira racked his brain, struggling to remember what his friend meant.

"It seems that whatever took him out, it is still somewhat in his system." That was Byakuya, cool and reasoned as ever, and Kira frowned, as fragments of the previous night began to piece themselves together.

Slowly he pulled himself into a sitting position, clutching at his head with a groan as the world span a second time.

"The swords." He managed at last. "Kuchiki-taichou, I found… the swords."

"Perhaps you did." Byakuya said with a sigh. "But even though they were clearly inside the vault… now one of them no longer is."

"*What*?"

Horror flooded Kira's expression, as this revelation jerked him back to awareness. "But…"

"It's all right. It isn't your fault." Renji assured him. "Someone came in and knocked you for six. The whole of Third Squad are nursing a hangover this morning. But you seemed t'get the worst of it."

"Worst…" Kira frowned, remembering the dizzy, disorientating feeling that had dominated his senses.

"One of your men passed out in front of 6-Bantai." Byakuya added evenly. "He was barely coherent, but clear enough to let us know that something untoward had occurred at 3-Bantai. Given our recent conversations, I decided it was most prudent for us to investigate ourselves — so Renji and I did so. I do not know what poison afflicted you — by the time we arrived, it had been completely sucked from the scene. But it was fairly clear from the general unconscious state of 3-Bantai's members that someone had interfered."

"The 'someone else' whose hand you mentioned interfering before, Taichou?" Renji asked, and Byakuya nodded.

"Quite probably." He said, his eyes glinting with a sudden steely light. "In any case, the only thing they seem to have taken from the vault was the *zanpakutou*, Hassuiryou."

Kira's shoulders sank, and he raised his gaze pitifully to the Captain's.

"Then I failed." He murmured. "I… even if I was attacked, it was my fault. I should have… 3-Bantai's security is my responsibility."

"If we are dealing with the nature of intruder I believe we are, you would not have been able to do anything to prevent this." Byakuya shook his head, and Kira saw a rare flicker of compassion in his grey eyes. "Besides, you should probably rest. You were not breathing when Renji found you. Fortunately I know enough healing Kidou to bring back basic life signs — since his seemed to have deserted him. But whatever the poison was, you evidently got a heavier dose than your men. Which, to me, suggests you did your best to protect them. In the circumstances, Kira, I do not think you should be so downcast. We will simply have to re-strategise. That is all."

"Taichou's right." Renji frowned. "Trouble is, even if we start asking questions and poking around in the areas we suspect we should be… we've no proof. And because you were pumped full of something which was apparently hallucinogenic, even if you remember what happened… it's still not enough to go on. None of 3-Bantai seem any

more clear on what exactly went on inside the squad building. So we're stuck, dammit. It's a pain in the butt."

"I don't remember clearly." Kira admitted. "I… I remember finding the chamber, and finding the swords. Then… it gets hazy. There was… a clown, I think. Or a jester. Something like that. I think… I saw a girl. I remember her eyes, boring into me, like she was sad about something. And… smoke. Strange smelling smoke. And… the world spinning in circles…"

He swallowed hard, feeling sick again.

"That's not very helpful, is it?" He asked plaintively.

"I have informed 10-Bantai of what Renji and I discovered inside 3-Bantai." Byakuya said frankly. "They have since taken control of the scene and, now 2-Bantai are also aware, Special Forces are currently taking the place to pieces. Hitsugaya-taichou has taken hold of your men in your absence. They appear to be quite concerned about your condition."

Kira managed a rueful smile.

"I think maybe they think more of me than they should." He admitted. "We're all in the same boat, after all — struggling on without a Captain. I'm a face they know, so it's easy for them to look to me. But it's nice to know they're worried."

"We have managed to take one *zanpakutou* in custody, at least." Byakuya continued. "The Sou Taichou has Eishoushi in his care now. Several of the other missing weapons were also safely recovered, thanks to your diligent work in locating them. And the specific nature of the theft makes me wonder…"

"You don't think the ryoka boy was involved, sir?" Kira looked startled, and Byakuya shook his head.

"Fortunately, not. As yet, that is an eventuality we don't have to face." He said simply. "Ishida Uryuu is within 6-Bantai, and I have ensured he's been kept under very close watch since last night, even when he thinks he's alone. He has not obtained the sword, and probably does not even know that it has been unearthed. So long as that situation exists… we still have options remaining open to us, and we will simply have to pursue them as best we can."

"*You* need to stay here and sleep off whatever this drug is, though." Renji said firmly. "Shit, Kira, I walked in here this mornin' t'see you out cold in one room an' Hinamori out cold in the next an' I really thought my old friends were all bein' knocked off, one by one. Don't

do somethin' like that again, all right? I'm serious. If you want to go digging in ancient rooms in the future, at least make sure you've got a shitload of backup to rely on!"

"I didn't think going into a disused chamber would be that dangerous."

Kira gathered his wits, pushing back the bedcovers and swinging his legs over the side as he prepared to get up. "I wish I could remember more clearly — but maybe if I went back there, I would. None of my squad remember anything at all?"

"Woah, didn't the Taichou already tell you to rest?" As the fair-haired Shinigami pulled himself to his feet, he swayed as though about to fall back down, and Renji grabbed him roughly by the shoulders, marshalling him back down onto the bed. "Where are you going? You stopped breathing, dammit! You're in no state to do anything!"

Kira raised his eyes to his friend's, uncharacteristic resolution in their hazy blue depths.

"3-Bantai is my squad." He managed. "There's n… noone else to take control of them. Hitsugaya-taichou's kind, but he already has his own squad and 5-Bantai to oversee, with Hinamori-kun sick. And I… I'm all right. Just a little shaky on my feet. If I get to my office, I can sit down… and it'll be all right. If my squad are worried… besides, if something attacked them, someone should be there. Just in case it h… happens again."

Byakuya eyed him keenly.

"It appears that you have taken quite seriously the things that the Sou Taichou said to you about responsibility for your men." He said quietly, and Kira reddened, meeting the Captain's gaze with a hesitant one of his own. "But in this instance I believe Renji is correct. You are of no use to your subordinates if you cannot even stand, let alone draw Wabisuke from its sheath and release it in defence of them. For the time being, 3-Bantai is populated with many Special Forces Operatives and Omaeda-fukutaichou has also been posted outside the chamber to prevent further interference. As for 3-Bantai's administration, if Hitsugaya-taichou is too occupied to assist, then I am more than willing to send Renji or go myself if papers need to be filed and men assigned."

"Kuchiki-taichou…?" Kira stared at him blankly, and a faint smile touched Byakuya's lips.

“That is an order, Kira-fukutaichou.” He said evenly. “Remain here and recover your strength. Try, if you like, to remember more clearly the events of last night — since you appear to recall more than any of your men are able. That can be your next assignment… in the meantime, leave everything else to us.”

“Y… yes, sir.” Kira faltered, then relaxed under Renji’s grip, sinking back against his pillows with a sigh. “If you think that’s the best thing, I… I’ll do as you say.”

“Taichou’s right. We’ll handle anything that needs to be handled.” Renji added. “Besides, that sword is our business anyhow. The Quincy kid is in our custody, after all… it makes sense for us to take up the hunt from here.”

Kira eyed Renji for a moment, then,

“If someone took it, did they do it to protect him from it?” He wondered. “Or… or is it the other way? If he didn’t take it himself in one of his blackouts… who would?”

“That is what we have yet to firmly establish.” Byakuya said frankly. “But tell me, Kira, did anyone else know of the documents I gave you regarding 3-Bantai’s layout? I cannot imagine you discussed the matter with your subordinates beyond what was necessary, but beyond that…”

Kira frowned, trying to remember.

“Ukitake-taichou.” He said at length. “In the archives. He gave me some advice and we discussed some possibilities. But surely… Ukitake-taichou…”

“Ukitake.” Byakuya pursed his lips. “I see. Then perhaps it is time I spoke to him as well.”

“You don’t think Ukitake-taichou knocked Kira and his buddies cold and stole the blade, Taichou?” Renji stared at his Captain as if he’d lost his mind, and Byakuya sighed, shooting his subordinate a long-suffering, scornful look.

“Do not suggest things which are clearly preposterous.” He said cuttingly. “Of course not.”

“Then…”

“Ukitake was a Captain during the time of my Grandfather, and also during the time Shizuki Ametatsu was in charge of 10-Bantai.” Byakuya said quietly. “You know that yourself, from the information Rukia relayed to you about his recollections. It is possible that he

knows something that we do not — as he is the only one of us to have seen this sword released."

"He said something about using the Senkai Gate." Kira remembered. "He sounded… worried about something, and said there was someone he needed to speak to. He left the archive before I did, but when I went back there the next morning he was back again, going through a whole load of books with a really preoccupied expression on his face. Then he left… and I don't know where he went."

"I shall do my best to track him down." Byakuya reflected. "For the time being, you have been useful enough, Kira. Renji, follow me. We have work to do."

"Yes, sir." Renji nodded, casting Kira a glance as he did so.

"You make sure you recover, an' remember all you can about whatever jerk attacked you." He added, and Kira nodded his head.

"I'll do my best." He agreed. "Thank you, Abarai-kun. Kuchiki-taichou. I'll leave it with you."

"Taichou, what do you think about all of this?"

As Renji and Byakuya made their way slowly out of 4-Bantai's busy squad courtyard, Renji cast his companion a glance, reading the tension that ran through his taciturn Captain's lithe frame. "Someone comin' in an' messin' up 3-Bantai… almost killing Kira… all for the sake of some sword?"

"I believe it is conveniently timed that such a thing should happen whilst we are struggling to get to the bottom of Ishida Uryuu's unusual complaint." Byakuya said quietly. "And that someone or something, like I said before, has become involved to muddy the waters."

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"That someone or something made itself known last night, when it assaulted the members of 3-Bantai." He added. "Although without proof I am loath to voice my immediate suspicions out loud."

Renji frowned, his gaze becoming thoughtful.

"Kira said he remembered a clown or a jester." He murmured. "Which could've been a complete delusion, judging by the state of him

after the attack. But what if it wasn't, Taichou? What if it was… something else?"

Byakuya nodded.

"The thought had crossed my mind." He agreed, pausing for a moment as they passed 12-Bantai's offices to glance up at the white and black painted insignia over its gateway. Renji followed his companion's gaze, letting out a snort.

"He's sick in the head, though, if he'd do something so extreme just to get a hold of a dead man's sword." He muttered. "And he's on *our* side?"

"Be careful what you say, Renji." Byakuya warned. "The walls have a tendency to possess ears in this vicinity — besides, as I said, we have no proof. And whilst I understand your feelings — I have already told you that acting on your emotions is a foolhardy way to exist. Kira will recover. His anxiety for his squad is proof of that fact."

"I guess." Renji pursed his lips. "Actually, t'be honest, sir, even though he was stumblin' all over his feet… I think he was better today than he was when I first brought him to speak to you. All the sh… stuff with Ichimaru-taichou really got to him. I was worried he'd quit being a Vice Captain altogether… but today he seemed focused on 3-Bantai, like he was before Ichimaru-taichou left."

"Your young friend is as foolish as you are, but not without potential." Byakuya said evenly. "If he seeks to utilise that, 3-Bantai will remain in safe hands until such time as a new Captain is selected."

He gestured towards the end of the street.

"Meantime, we should request an audience with Ukitake." He added. "And see what he knows."

"Kuchiki-taichou, Abarai-fukutaichou." As they crossed the 13-Bantai threshold, Kiyone hurried forward, bowing her head in respect for the noble-born Captain and his companion before eying them with a look of confusion. "Why are you… did you come to see the Captain?"

"Yes." Byakuya inclined his head. "Though I understand from my sister that he has been in poor health recently, I hope he will be able to stand company for a short while."

Kiyone bit her lip, slowly shaking her head.

"The Captain isn't here." She said apologetically. "He went to see

the Sou Taichou late last night… and then this morning he told us he had an important errand to run and left. He wouldn't let us go with him — Kotsubaki and I are holding the fort here."

Byakuya's eyes narrowed.

"Not here?" He echoed. "And he did not give you any clue, perhaps, to what this errand might be?"

"No, sir." Kiyone shook her head again. "He's spent some time in the archives, yesterday and the evening before. Kotsubaki and I were worried, because he's had a fever all this week but he said it was necessary. He seemed quite preoccupied when he left… but he said that he had to go alone. I wanted to follow him, but someone had to see to 13-Bantai's morning drill, so…"

She trailed off, and Byakuya pursed his lips.

"Could he have gone to the archive again, Taichou?" Renji suggested. "Kira did say that they discussed a few things there."

"No…" Byakuya shook his head. "Kira also mentioned the Senkai Gate, did he not? I suspect that, if Ukitake spoke to the Sou Taichou and is not here with his squad, it is probably something relating to that."

"Ukitake-taichou's gone to the Real World? *On his own*?" Kiyone looked panicked, and Byakuya cast her a cool glance.

"Do you think that your Captain is incapable of doing such a thing without you and your companions to nanny him?" He asked acidly, and Kiyone reddened, shaking her head.

"No, sir, it's not that, sir, it's just… he doesn't usually disappear like that. Or go to the Real World. And… the thing is, Kuchiki-taichou, that he's not really been well recently. Going to the Real World takes a lot of energy and I don't understand why he'd want to do it without telling anyone."

"Evidently he told the Sou Taichou, and evidently he didn't see a problem with it." Byakuya said frankly. "Ukitake is the best judge of his own physical state, after all."

"But if he's gone to do something there, we won't be able to talk to him." Renji said with a sigh.

"Very astute, Renji." Byakuya cast him a sidelong glance, and Renji frowned, biting back the urge to retort as he saw the concern masked beneath his Captain's usual even gaze. "We will simply have to wait until he returns here — so for now, it is best we return to 6-Bantai and

take care of our own routine business."

"Kiyone! Kiyone, where are you, you feather-brained freak show!"

Before anyone could react, there was a commotion from the pathway beyond, and the tall, square-built frame of Sentarou became visible as he charged across the courtyard, stopping dead as he caught sight of his colleagues companions.

"K… K… Kuchiki-taichou! Abarai-fukutaichou!"

"What are you screaming about?" Kiyone demanded. "We've got visitors for the Captain and you're leaping around like an untrained ape — what do you think the Taichou would say if he saw you acting like that?"

For once, Sentarou was silenced by the fact his screech had been heard by the noble Captain of the Sixth Squad, and in the resultant silence, Renji cast the two unfortunate Shinigami a quizzical glance.

"Is something wrong, Kotsubaki?" He asked bluntly. "You seem wound up."

Sentarou gathered his wits, eying Byakuya hesitantly for a moment, then nodding his head.

"The Taichou's back." He said frankly, grabbing Kiyone by the arm. "He sent me to find you. He's got the girl with him. The ryoka girl from the Real World."

"From the Real World…?" Byakuya raised an eyebrow, and Kiyone bristled, looking indignant.

"Don't act all like the Taichou told you he was going to the Real World, Kotsubaki! You didn't know any more than I did that he'd been to the Sou Taichou about the Senkai Gate!"

"I did so know, you snot-nosed simpleton." Sentarou snapped back smartly. "Because he told me that he was going, right before he did."

"When did he do that? You're lying!"

"When he said '*I'm going to the Real World for a little bit, Sentarou, and hope to be back soon*." Sentarou said frankly, and Kiyone shook her head.

"He wouldn't tell you and not me!"

"You weren't there, you moron. You were busy helping in the mess hall and so he told me he was going and left. So there."

"Much as I hate to interfere in this intellectual debate of wits…"

Byakuya interjected softly, and at the sound of his voice, both Shinigami stopped mid-argument, turning to face him with sheepish, apprehensive expressions. At their attention, Byakuya inclined his head.

“If your Captain has returned, might one of you do me the favour of telling him I wish to speak to him?”

“I’ll go!” Kiyone said immediately, before Sentarou could react, disappearing into the squad building with a triumphant smile on her young features. With a grimace, Sentarou was after her, determined not to let her outpace him in the hunt for the Captain’s attention.

Byakuya sighed, rubbing his temples, and Renji found that, for once, he sympathised fully with his complicated leader.

“What about Inoue, Taichou?” He asked quietly. “If Ukitake-taichou went to the Real World to get her, then…”

“I imagine he knows something that we do not.” Byakuya said simply. “But we shall soon find out. Here they come.”

“Shi-i-i-it.” Renji pursed his lips. “Kiyone wasn’t kidding, was she? He looks like death warmed up and served for breakfast.”

“From where do you get such unpalatable turns of phrase, Renji?” Byakuya shot him a pained glance. “You had forgotten, I presume, that you are speaking of a Captain level Shinigami of several hundred years experience… within his own squad barracks, in the presence of your own superior officer?”

“Sorry.” Renji looked rueful. “But you know what I mean, sir, don’t you? He really doesn’t look like his trip to the Real World agreed with him.”

Byakuya merely shot him a look, turning and crossing the dusty ground to meet the other Captain half-way, and with a sigh, Renji hastened to catch him up.

“Byakuya.” Ukitake’s voice was somewhat hoarse, but he cast his colleague a tired smile. “I’m sorry if I’ve kept you waiting — what can I do for you this morning?”

“I understand you’ve been to the Real World.” Byakuya cast the apprehensive looking Orihime a glance. “And come back with company, too.”

“The Sou Taichou agreed that it was appropriate for me to go and retrieve her.” Ukitake said evenly. “For Ishida Uryuu’s sake, if things continue to move forward.”

“For Ishida’s sake?” Renji eyed Orihime in surprise. “You’ve come here just to hold Ishida’s hand?”

“No!” Orihime flushed, looking embarrassed as she hurriedly shook her head. “It’s not like that, Renji-kun! It’s just… because when Ishida-kun is… is not himself, he thinks I’m someone called Niji. And Ukitake-san and Urahara-san both think that, if he got… well… upset, I might be able to talk to him. Ukitake-san came to get me because of that… he says that Ishida-kun already did something… to Byakuya-san’s offices.”

“Something is a small understatement, though it could have been worse.” Byakuya eyed her keenly. “So you are here, in fact, as a calming measure?”

“Something of that nature.” Ukitake nodded his head. “I hope it’s an unnecessary precaution. But…”

He faltered, coughing and Renji eyed him apprehensively.

“Are you all right, Ukitake-taichou?” He asked softly, and Ukitake drew a deep breath into his lungs, pausing a moment before he tried to speak. Slowly he nodded.

“Thank you, Abarai. I’m quite all right.”

“Ukitake, I believe you were assisting Kira Izuru in the investigation into hidden chambers beneath 3-Bantai?” Byakuya asked quietly, and Ukitake nodded, looking surprised.

“We did have a c… conversation about it.” He agreed. “What of it?”

“Last night Kira found the chamber, and the missing weapons.” Renji said frankly. ‘But someone else found him. When we got there, the whole squad were out cold… an’ Kira was worst of the lot. He’s all right,’ As Ukitake’s eyes widened in alarm. “But shaky an’ woosy thanks to whatever drug got pumped into him. More importantly, though, somethin’ got stolen from that room.”

Ukitake looked grave.

“Hassuiryou.” He murmured, and Byakuya nodded his head.

“You don’t seem surprised.” He observed, and Ukitake shook his head.

“I wish I was, but I’m not.” He confessed.

“Please, what is Ha… Hassuiryou?” Orihime asked at that moment, confusion in her grey eyes, and Renji cast her a rueful smile.

“A *zanpakutou* that belongs to a dead dude named Shizuki.” He said evenly. “For some reason, a lo-o-ot of people seem t’want to get their hands on it.”

“What about Ishida-kun?” Ukitake asked softly. “Has *he* tried to do so?”

“Not so far as we know.” Byakuya shook his head. “And it is not my plan to allow him to. However, now the sword is no longer just sealed away but actively missing…”

Ukitake frowned.

“I think it would be a bad thing if… if Ishida-kun was to lay hands on that… that sword.” He said unevenly, his voice cracking somewhat as he struggled against further spasms in his chest.

“I agree.” Byakuya said evenly. “Though I’d be curious to know your reasons for feeling that way.”

Ukitake glanced at Renji for a moment, then Orihime, as if debating whether or not to air his fears in their presence. Then he sighed, putting a hand to his head.

“I knew Shizuki.” He said hoarsely. “I trained him. I know that sword and what it can do. More, I know what it did do. And what it could do again… if given the chance.”

“But Shizuki-san is dead.” Orihime murmured. “Properly dead, isn’t he? Ukitake-san, didn’t you say…?”

“Shizuki is dead.” Ukitake managed, though the 6-Bantai Vice Captain could tell by the pallor in his senior’s cheeks that the 13-Bantai Captain had about reached his limit. “But Ishida-kun… is very… much… alive.”

“Huh?” Renji was bewildered by this. “Of course he is, sir — what do you mean?”

Ukitake opened his mouth to respond, but instead he was hit by a fresh spasm and he faltered, clasping his hand to his mouth and choking violently as he struggled to catch his breath.

“Ukitake-san!” Orihime exclaimed, fear in her eyes as blood gushed from the 13-Bantai Captain’s lips, and as he stumbled, Renji hurried to grasp him firmly by the shoulders.

“Kotsubaki! Kiyone!” He yelled, his gaze scouring the courtyard for the two Third Seat Shinigami, and at his holler they appeared, immediately hastening to their Captain’s side as they registered his

failing condition.

“Taichou!” Kiyone was the first to reach him, genuine fear in her gaze as Ukitake struggled to drag hoarse gasps of air into his lungs. Blood stained his fingers, pooling on the ground beneath them, and Renji could feel the shudders that still wracked the older man’s body as he held him firmly to prevent him falling headlong.

“I’ll go to 4-Bantai and get Unohana-taichou.” For once, all silliness had evaporated from Sentarou’s comical features as he cast his Captain an anxious glance. “Kuchiki-taichou, Abarai-fukutaichou — would you help Kiyone to get him inside? I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Without waiting for an answer, he slipped into shunpo, and Renji cast Byakuya a quizzical look.

Byakuya’s eyes narrowed, and he slowly shook his head.

“It appears I was mistaken.” He murmured. “Apparently you are the least good judge of your own physical health, Ukitake.”

Ukitake was beyond speaking, but he met Byakuya’s gaze with a rueful, frustrated one of his own. Byakuya sighed.

“Renji, can you manage to bring him yourself?” He asked quietly, and Renji nodded.

“I think its best then that we do as Kotsubaki suggested, and take him to his quarters.” Byakuya’s words were dismissive, but Renji was surprised by the genuine concern in his Captain’s slate-grey eyes. “Kiyone, go and ensure that everything is ready there to receive him — you know the layout far better than we do, and what it is he normally needs close by at times like this.”

“Yes, Kuchiki-taichou.” Kiyone nodded, disappearing immediately to do as she was bidden.

“Is there… anything *I* can do to help?” Orihime asked hesitantly, and Byakuya swung around, gazing at her in surprise as though he had momentarily forgotten she was there.

Orihime blushed, biting her lip.

“I… I might not be able to.” She said falteringly. “Because usually I just help people who are wounded. Not people who are sick… but… maybe if I used my shield…”

She trailed off, and Renji frowned.

“I think Ukitake-taichou’s probably too much for you to fix, Inoue.”

He said honestly. “He’s been sick for years, after all.”

“But… its my fault, because he came all the way to the Real World to get me.” Orihime was near tears now. “And he used his power with Urahara-san to open the gate so I could come through and…”

“It’s not your fault, girl.” Byakuya said firmly. “And Renji is correct. Whatever power you may or may not possess, I doubt it will have much impact on a condition of this nature. If you truly want to help, then go to 6-Bantai and join your ryoka friends there. Renji and I will return shortly — you may tell my sister that.”

“But…” Orihime gazed at him in dismay, and despite himself Renji felt a touch sorry for her.

“Go find Ichigo.” He said frankly. “He an’ Rukia an’ Ishida should be at the squad offices, an’ it’s all right. Unohana-taichou’ll come when she hears Ukitake-taichou’s havin’ one of his attacks — it’s better you do as the Taichou says.”

“All… all right.” Orihime looked crestfallen, but she nodded her head. “Thank you, Renji-kun. I’m sorry to… to have been a bother.”

With that she turned on her heel, making her way slowly towards the 13-Bantai gate.

Byakuya let out his breath in a rush.

“I sincerely hope your bringing her here was worth this, Ukitake.” He said reproachfully, and Ukitake closed his eyes briefly, summoning his strength to talk.

“It’s not… the girl’s… fault.” He murmured. “Don’t… take it out… on her. I… had to… go. Shizuki is… my affair.”

“I have a feeling that Unohana will disagree with that.” Was all Byakuya vouchsafed, disapproval in his gaze. “Renji, if you please… it seems quite apparent to me that Ukitake’s fever has compelled him to act foolishly, and the sooner he is able to lie down the better.”

Renji picked up the warning signs in his Captain’s voice, and decided it would be better not to comment, instead shifting his grasp on the sick Captain so that most of the effort of getting to the bedchamber would fall on him. Even so, it was slow going, and Renji was aware of Ukitake’s hoarse, raspy breaths of air as he struggled to make the short distance. Once inside, he collapsed down onto his bed, and Kiyone was immediately at his side, anxiously pressing an ice-pack to his brow as she hovered over him.

“Kotsubaki will bring Unohana-taichou right away, so don’t try to

talk, sir, please." She said, as Ukitake opened his lips to speak. "If there's anything you need, let us get it for you. You need to rest."

Ukitake shook his head, a faint apology in his brown eyes.

"Byakuya…" He murmured, and Byakuya knelt stiffly at the bedside, seemingly aware that his colleague was unable to raise his voice any further without sparking fresh spasms.

"It would be nice to have a long and detailed conversation about this matter, but at present your subordinate is right, and you are not fit to hold it." He said frankly. "Still, there are a few things I wish to ask you. You need not voice any words, Ukitake. Simply nodding or shaking your head will suffice. Then Renji and I will leave you to rest — and, I trust, recover your strength."

Ukitake looked frustrated for a moment, but at length he sighed, the tension seeping from his body as he nodded his head in resignation. Byakuya's lips thinned.

"There are two things I want to know." He said quietly. "Firstly, whether or not you believe Ishida Uryuu is somehow the reincarnation of Shizuki Ametatsu?"

"*What*?" Renji's eyes almost fell out of his head, and Byakuya cast him a warning glance, before turning his gaze back on the patient.

"Am I correct?" He pressed softly, and slowly, Ukitake nodded his head.

"For real?" Renji bit his lip. "Shit… that makes it a hell of a lot more complicated, doesn't it?"

"Indeed it does." Byakuya agreed. "When the Quincy admitted that he had conversed with the sword, I wondered whether this might be the case. I had hoped otherwise — but considering Ukitake's decision to enter the Real World and procure Inoue Orihime just in case… I realised that his thoughts had shifted in the same direction as mine."

He met Ukitake's gaze once more.

"The second question, if you can answer it, is a little more difficult to ask." He admitted. "But… Ukitake, I think perhaps when Kira said you had someone you needed to speak to… it was not Inoue Orihime whose advice you sought, was it? Yes, you wanted to bring her back here, but in fact it was also a convenient smokescreen for the other reason you decided to go. You went to see Urahara Kisuke, didn't you? And you went to see him because you felt… he knew a certain individual better than most people here in Seireitei."

“Taichou?” Renji blinked, staring at his Captain in confusion and wonder, as Ukitake slowly nodded his head again.

“I can’t voice the name of the person we’re talking about, as I will not risk creating speculation or gossip without evidence.” Byakuya continued, ignoring Renji as if he wasn’t there. “But when I saw Kira’s condition and the manner in which he and his comrades had been attacked, it seemed the obvious solution. For you to go to the Real World, Ukitake, it seemed to confirm it. Urahara Kisuke may be an exile and a criminal in Soul Society’s eyes. But, in this particular instance… he may have knowledge that is of some use.”

He sighed.

“But until you recover, we cannot discuss that knowledge.” He said resignedly. “Still, even so, I believe we have made some progress.”

He got to his feet, gesturing for Renji to follow him.

“Take care of yourself, Ukitake.” He added, as he moved towards the door. “I sincerely hope your gamble with your health does not prove to be in vain.”

With that he was gone, and Renji cast a last glance at the patient before slipping out through the door to catch him up.

“First Kira, now Ukitake-taichou.” He murmured. “What’s going on, Taichou?”

“Kira was attacked. Ukitake has simply succumbed to his own particular weakness — the two episodes are coincidentally timed but not directly connected.” Byakuya said frankly. “However, he has the same suspicions I do, and that is enough to know for now. Any more he learnt from Urahara will have to wait until he can speak to us more coherently.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen him weak like that.” Renji mused. “It’s kind of scary, t’be honest, sir. Ukitake-taichou’s like one of Soul Society’s support pillars… I didn’t realise that he could crumble too.”

“He is a man.” Byakuya said frankly. “And his weakness is not physical or spiritual frailty but his susceptibility to human compassion. Shizuki Ametatsu died two hundred years ago. Yet it appears that even now Ukitake has a fondness for him that has driven him to go beyond his limits.”

“I thought this guy was a murderer and a madman, though.” Renji’s brows knitted together. “Why would Ukitake-taichou be fond of someone like that?”

“Why indeed.” Byakuya pursed his lips. “From Ukitake’s own words, he believes the sword is dangerous. That means he knows beyond all doubt that the one who wielded it was also dangerous. You witnessed it also, did you not, Renji? The way in which Ishida Uryuu attacked our barracks without provocation? This is not an individual who, I suspect, will be easily reasoned with.”

“Is Ishida really Shizuki reborn?”

“The souls appear to match, yes.” Byakuya nodded. “There is no other way the Quincy could have communicated with the *zanpakutou* otherwise. This in itself is a natural process — what concerns me is that Ishida Uryuu has memories which belong to a life he did not live. Those memories should have long since been sealed and beyond his reach. He is connecting far too closely with the past that led to Shizuki’s insanity and death. I do not know how to unmesh those things, nor do I know what might happen if he was able to locate the *zanpakutou*. What happened at 6-Bantai may be only a mild symptom in comparison.”

“Shit.” Renji let out a low whistle. “I’m startin’ to see why Kira was so anxious to get outta bed and back t’work.”

“Kira has known my concern from the start, or near enough.” Byakuya admitted. “I was afraid that you would react to it too impulsively, so I decided it was better to entrust the information to him. However…”

“That’s charming.” Renji snorted. “Thanks for having faith in me, Taichou.”

“If you give me grounds to doubt you, you should not blame me for them.” Came Byakuya’s unrepentant response. “*However,* I will now share them with you, too. Since the situation is more serious — in that the sword is likely in the hands of someone whose movements are not easy to predict.”

Renji pursed his lips, but said nothing, and Byakuya spread his hands.

“If Ishida Uryuu is completely engulfed by Shizuki Ametatsu, there is only one line of action open to us.” He said quietly. “Ukitake’s desperate attempts to prevent it have only hardened my convictions in this regard. Whatever your feelings or friendships or impulses on this matter, Renji, it does not change anything. At present, the Quincy is weakened by his inability to use his own *reiryoku*. If it reaches a point where Shizuki’s memories and sense of self become dominant and there is no longer any sign of the human boy’s will in what he does…”

He frowned, narrowing his eyes.

“It will be our duty as men of the Gotei-13 to slay him.” He said quietly, his fingers closing briefly around Senbonzakura’s hilt. “No matter how unpleasant a task it may be.”

Author’s Note: Hassuiryou and the kanji ;)

Since this seems to have caused some uncertainty among reviewers, I’ll straighten the record. Anyone who’s read any of my Yuugi stories knows I’m not averse to using or twitching Kanji where the mood takes me, but I want to be clear that Hassuiryou’s name choosing was not one of those times.

The word dragon in Japanese is ‘ryuu’ and can be written with either of two kanji — 龍 or 竜. Uryuu uses the second of these in his name. Ametatsu uses the same one in his. Hassuiryou uses the first one at the end of his name.

Though ‘ryuu’ is the most common reading for the kanji, tatsu and ryou (and rou) are also other possible readings.

Hassuiryou’s three kanji mean “eight” (hachi) ‘water’ (mizu) and “dragon” (ryuu) if you split them into their componant parts. The ‘dragon’ kanji can also mean ‘imperial’, however, and in the past I’ve come across words in Japanese to do with imperial finery that end in the dragon kanji read as ‘ryou’.

Hassuiryou is not just a dragon. He’s the Rain Dragon, after all. If people want to consider it because it’s old fashioned, or because it’s a name, or whatever — I don’t mind :) Whatever suits you is good with me. But it wasn’t a mistake :) Hassuiryou’s name kanji were chosen from the start to look and sound the way they do. It was one of the first things I decided on when I came to writing this story. So that’s how it is. :)

Vraie is often an idiot. But this time it was deliberate idiocy ;)

On another note…

..Can Shinigami drink tea in the Real World? Answers on a postcard… ;

Chapter Twenty: Baiting The Snare

Chapter Twenty: Baiting The Snare

As Orihime left the 13-Bantai barracks, her heart was heavy in her chest. Behind her, she could hear Byakuya's voice giving further instructions, and she frowned, her brows knitting together as she remembered the sudden, frightening way in which 13-Bantai's Captain had collapsed. He had seemed so deathly pale, she reflected sadly, anxiety flaring in her young heart. And then, to cough up blood…

It's serious, isn't it, to cough up blood? Oh, but Renji-kun said that he'd been sick for a long time. Even so, though… he really looked bad. If he was already feeling poorly… has coming to the Real World to get me made things worse?

She glanced at her hands, regret stirring inside of her.

Could I have helped? Or am I as useless in a situation like that as Byakuya-san said? Probably he's right, in the end. Probably there isn't anything I can do except get in the way. But even so…

She paused, turning back to gaze up at the black and white logo that hung over the gateway.

Even so, I'd have liked to have tried. Even if I couldn't do anything… I wanted to help him somehow.

She let out a heavy sigh, turning her attention back to the main thoroughfare that ran between the offices of the thirteen Gotei squads.

Why did Ukitake-san come to get me, in any case? Surely there's nothing I can do for Ishida-kun. If Yoruichi-san was right… if things are serious here too… my Rikka shield can't heal him from that. And maybe there's a small possibility he'll believe I'm Niji and let me talk to him but… but the last time he did that… the last time…

She faltered, her cheeks flushing red with embarrassment as she recalled the awkwardness of the kiss.

That mustn't be allowed to happen again. Ishida-kun was so upset about it… and… and if there's a chance he might attack Kurosaki-kun because of me… I can't let something like that happen to him again. Ishida-kun's so proud, after all. He hates being embarrassed. Maybe bringing me here was a mistake after all. Maybe it would've been better if Sado-kun had come instead — at least, with his strength, he might have been able to make a

difference.

She kicked absently at the dirt, disliking the feeling of helplessness that welled up inside of her. Although Byakuya had told her to go to 6-Bantai, she was apprehensive of doing so, uncertain about what she might find when she got there. The suddenness of Ukitake's summons coupled with his dramatic collapse told her that matters had become more urgent — but even on the trip between worlds the 13-Bantai Captain had told her little. At the time, Orihime had thought he'd seemed troubled and tired. Now, however, she understood.

He was fighting against his fever, to ensure I got here safe and sound.

She sighed, shaking her head as if to clear it.

I guess that means it is my fault, then, in the end. If I was stronger…

"Well, well. There's a face I didn't expect to see quite so soon as this."

At the sound of the voice Orihime faltered, turning in surprise and consternation to face the grinning, self-satisfied form of the 12-Bantai Captain.

"K… Kurotsuchi-san?" She said hesitantly, taking an instinctive step backwards, and at her reticence Kurotsuchi laughed, holding up his clawed hands in mock surrender.

"Now, now, there's no need for that." He said softly, his voice deceptively gentle. "The last time we spoke, true, we were enemies. But that was a long time ago, Inoue-san. You were mere ryoka and I was doing my duty as a Captain of Soul Society in attempting to apprehend you. None of us knew about the terrible things that were to come — these days, surely, we're on the same side?"

"I… I suppose that's true." Orihime said cautiously, and Kurotsuchi's features twitched into a look of hurt dismay.

"What's this?" He murmured. "You'll happily visit other Captains' quarters, but you won't even face me and hold a civil conversation? I'm hurt. I'm sure you aren't so ill-disposed towards Kuchiki-taichou, or, say, Abarai-fukutaichou — both of whom inflicted grievous harm on your friend Kurosaki, unless I miss my guess…?"

Despite herself, Orihime was ashamed.

"I… I'm sorry." She said guiltily. "You're right. I shouldn't be so suspicious of everyone. Even if you and Ishida-kun did fight… there's no reason now for me to consider you any differently from Byakuya-san or Ukitake-san or any of the other Captains."

“Well, indeed.” Kurotsuchi bestowed her with a radiant smile. “After all, you and I share a close acquaintance, I believe. A truly mutual friend, one might say.”

“A… mutual friend?” Orihime looked startled, and Kurotsuchi nodded.

“Urahara Kisuke.” He agreed softly, and Orihime’s eyes widened.

“Urahara-san?”

“Didn’t you know?” Kurotsuchi tut-tutted under his breath. “But it’s just like him, playing games and keeping secrets. Urahara was my predecessor here, of course — but he was also my close colleague for some years in other, more scientific respects. His exile was a terrible shock to everyone in 12-Bantai, you know.”

“I see.” Orihime offered the odd man a faint smile. “I didn’t realise, but it makes sense. So, in that case, you must know why I’m here.”

“Of course.” Kurotsuchi said simply. “To help the Quincy boy, whose life has taken an unfortunately complicated twist of late.”

Orihime sighed.

“Ishida-kun doesn’t like you very much.” She admitted. “He probably wouldn’t like it if he knew you knew about all of those things.”

“Quite probably not.” Kurotsuchi responded evenly. “Yet in some respects I feel it was my fault, Inoue-san. After all, it was in fighting me that Ishida-kun lost his Quincy powers, was it not? Everything since appears to have been a direct consequence of that fact.”

“So you know about that, too.” Orihime looked troubled, and Kurotsuchi smiled.

“Between you and me, my dear, I’ve had Nemu paying particularly close attention to him since you all returned to your own world from Soul Society.” He said softly. “I was afraid something like this could happen. In the fight between us, he went to extremes and pushed himself far beyond the limit of his human body. In doing so, the obvious end result was a loss of spiritual power. Yet he has potential — oh yes, great potential. And it seemed a shame to waste that when he’s still so young. I’ve done a lot of study work with the Quincy over the past hundred years… I suppose I thought that perhaps I might be able to help him recover.”

Orihime’s gazed up at him, a sudden flicker of hope in her grey eyes.

“Do you mean… you can give him back his powers?” She asked softly. “And if he got those powers back… maybe all of this weird stuff would stop happening to him?”

“It’s a complicated study.” Kurotsuchi’s eyes glittered with enthusiasm. “And I like a challenge. Yes, Inoue-san. I believe I can, shall we say, restore Ishida-kun’s spiritual power. To an extremely high level, in fact. I have devoted much time and effort of late to that exact thing.”

He gestured towards the 12-Bantai squad buildings.

“Will you trust me enough to come inside and see the fruits of my labours?” He asked. “Your Quincy friend doesn’t trust me, as you said yourself. But he does trust *you*. In fact, he was willing to fight me to defend you, I seem to remember. So if he will listen to anyone, Inoue-san — I’m quite certain that he’d listen to you.”

“I don’t know about that.” Orihime frowned, nevertheless allowing the Captain to guide her into the 12-Bantai courtyard and across to the door that led into the Institute itself. “I mean, when Ishida-kun has his mind made up, it’s pretty difficult to change it. I think its part of being a Quincy. He doesn’t like being protected — he has a lot of pride.”

“I am well familiar with the Quincy concept of pride.” Kurotsuchi’s lips thinned slightly. “Well acquainted, my dear. But even so, a friend for whom he would risk his life… I’m sure that you stand a far better chance than anyone else in speaking to him.”

“Ukitake-san said that something had happened at Byakuya-san’s squad offices… that Ishida-kun had done something he shouldn’t have done and caused some damage.” Orihime reflected. “It means he’s getting worse, doesn’t it?”

“Ukitake…?” Kurotsuchi paused, consternation crossing his gaze. “So he was the one responsible for your sudden appearance here today? I see. That would explain why I saw you leaving 13-Bantai. Ukitake’s wanting to help Ishida-kun too then, I trust?”

“Yes, although I don’t know if he can.” Orihime bit her lip. “He… he really isn’t… very well.”

“Well, that’s nothing new.” Kurotsuchi said dismissively, and Orihime shook her head, grasping Kurotsuchi by the arm in her eagerness to make herself understood.

“No… no, I mean really not well. He was coughing blood and he looked like he was about to die. Renji-kun said he’d been sick a long

time — but even so, Kurotsuchi-san… you're a scientist, aren't you? Surely…"

"Ukitake suffers from a severe, if rare soul-based strain of tuberculosis that exhibits from an early age and appears to be genetic rather than epidemic." Kurotsuchi gently detached her fingers from his sleeve. "There is no cure that I could provide, Inoue-san. If he is foolhardy and pushes himself too far, he has attacks such as the one you saw. Although, I'm surprised — with the nature of ability you appear to have… could *you* not bring him any relief?"

"B… Byakuya-san said there was no point me trying." Orihime said dejectedly. "That whatever skills I had, they wouldn't be able to do anything and basically that I should go to 6-Bantai so I wasn't in the way."

Kurotsuchi's expression became thoughtful, and he tut-tutted under his breath.

"That was unkind of him." He murmured.

"I don't think he meant to be unkind." Orihime shook her head. "He was just… worried about Ukitake-san."

"Kuchiki-taichou?" Kurotsuchi shot her a startled look. "You do surprise me. I was under the impression that the Kuchiki-ke didn't generally look beyond their own level when it came to showing concern."

Orihime sighed.

"Byakuya-san was worried." She said firmly. "And I was, too. But I was useless… I couldn't do anything to help."

"And Ukitake is quite unwell, you say?" Kurotsuchi's eyes narrowed. "In that case, he would do better to rest and let other people take care of matters on his behalf."

He pushed open the door of the laboratory, ushering his young companion inside, and Orihime gazed around her with a mixture of awe and amazement, absorbing the many screens and the gaggle of odd-looking individuals which seemed to have all their attention focused on the dots and dashes that darted across in front of them. Kurotsuchi did not pause here, however, leading her through to a room beyond, and as he opened the door, Orihime let out an exclamation of surprise.

"But… all this… this is Quincy stuff, isn't it?"

"Gleaned and donated over the generations by the kind individuals

who helped me with my study." There was a veiled humour in Kurotsuchi's voice, and he nodded. "Though most of it had been put in storage. I exhumed it recently — on account of young Ishida-kun's plight, you see."

"I see." Orihime reached out to touch the faded edges of a Quincy mantle, turning to face him. "You really do know a lot about the Quincy, then, don't you?"

"More, I expect, than anyone in Soul Society." Kurotsuchi said confidently.

"Then I suppose if anyone can help Ishida-kun, it's you." Orihime let out a sigh. "I'm sorry I was suspicious of you, Kurotsuchi-san. Like you said, there's really no reason to be. Aizen-san and his friends were the real bad guys. Everything else was just a misunderstanding."

Kurotsuchi eyed her for a moment, and Orihime met his gaze, wondering what her enigmatic companion was thinking.

"At some point, my dear, I would like to speak to you in more detail about your own unique and fascinating techniques." He said softly. "I'm sure that, come the Winter battle, they will have a great role to play all of their own. But unfortunately, for now, your Quincy friend is more pressing on my attentions."

He moved across the chamber, pausing for a second, then pressing his hand to a panel of the wall. It slid back with a hiss, revealing a chamber beyond, and Orihime's eyes opened wide with disbelief.

"A secret… room?"

"Scientists' lives are full of secrets." Kurotsuchi told her cryptically, beckoning for her to follow. "But if you come with me, I'll show you the thing which I think will help your young friend most of all. Nemu has been taking good care of it for me… do you remember my Vice Captain, Nemu?"

As they stepped into the hidden room, Nemu glanced up at the sound of her name, her gaze flitting from Orihime to her Captain without a word. Orihime bowed her head hastily, offering the other girl a smile. Slowly Nemu followed suit, and Kurotsuchi's eyes twinkled with humour.

"Over here." Was all he said, however, gesturing to a glass case that held something glittering inside of it. As Orihime approached it, she could make out the rounded blue guard and long, glinting silver blade, and she faltered, staring at the Captain in confusion.

“But that… is that a *zanpakutou*?”

“You’re very astute. It is.” Kurotsuchi nodded.

“But… how will that help Ishida-kun regain his Quincy powers?” Orihime’s brows knitted in confusion, and Kurotsuchi chuckled, shaking his head.

“You mistake me, my dear.” He said softly. “I don’t believe I said anything about him regaining his *Quincy* powers.”

“But…”

“This sword is Hassuiryou.” Kurotsuchi explained. “Which I went to great pains to obtain on Ishida’s behalf.”

“Hass…” Shock flooded Orihime’s eyes, and she took a step away from the sword. “You mean… *you* were the one who stole it from 3-Bantai? *You* were the one who…”

“Stole is such an ugly word.” Kurotsuchi tut-tutted. “I prefer ‘borrowed’.”

“But… Ukitake-san said that Ishida-kun shouldn’t get his hands on that.” Orihime whispered. “That it might be dangerous. That…”

“That if he did, his *reiryoku* would be complete and Shizuki Ametatsu would be, effectively, brought back to life?” Kurotsuchi was amused. “But that’s fine, isn’t it? He has no power as a useless, drained Quincy. Why not restore the powers he had in a previous existence? Shizuki Ametatsu was a strong Captain, after all. A fighter and a man of principle by all accounts. Don’t you think that, in the end, it’s a better solution to the problem?”

“I… I need to leave now.” Orihime took a step away from the boxed blade, and Kurotsuchi let out a low chuckle.

“Oh, but you’re a part of my plans too, Inoue-san.” He said lightly. “I hadn’t imagined I’d encounter you so easily — when I felt your reiatsu flickering across Seireitei I knew I had to take my opportunity to waylay you at all costs.”

“But… I don’t understand.” Orihime stammered, fear touching her soul at the suddenly predatorial expression on her companion’s odd features.

“As I said before, Ishida-kun cares about protecting you.” Kurotsuchi murmured softly, reaching a long, clammy finger across to brush her cheek. She flinched back from his touch, light glittering across her hair-slides as she felt the spirits of her *ShunShun Rikka*

shield stir instinctively to attention. “Now I have the sword, I need to have the Quincy. But he won’t come to me on his own. So that’s why I have insurance. *You*.”

“Kurotsuchi-san, I…”

“It’s useless to protest.” Kurotsuchi offered Orihime a cool smile. “And if you use those powers of yours, so much the better for me to analyse and dissect them.”

“I thought you wanted to *help* Ishida-kun!”

“Oh, I do. Only you — and he — and noone else in Soul Society — seem to appreciate quite how much.”

“But he doesn’t *want* to be a Shinigami!”

“Want is such a vague, fleeting emotion.” Kurotsuchi said dismissively. “It’s not a matter of what he wants. A research subject doesn’t have wants. And in the name of science, all things are open season.”

He raised his hand.

“Now, Nemu, if you please.”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu got to her feet, taking Orihime firmly in her grasp as she pressed something soft and damp to the girl’s nose and mouth. Orihime struggled to scream, but as she did so a stifling, sweet smell choked her senses. As her mind seemed to be floating away from her legs and arms, she felt Nemu’s surprisingly strong grip loosen slightly, as she was lowered down onto the floor.

“It will wear off in about an hour.” She said quietly, and though Orihime could see and hear what was going on, she was unable to move even the slightest bit in her own defence.

“Then stop wasting time, you stupid wench.” Kurotsuchi told her sharply. “Take her and lock her in the confinement unit. Much as I’d like to dissect her here and now, if I’m to lure the Quincy here, I need the girl to be in one piece.”

He bent to touch Orihime’s hair-slides pensively, and she stared up at him in horror and fright.

“I’m sorry, my dear, but that experiment will have to wait for another day.” He said regretfully. “Nemu, I’m leaving you to take care of her. Then report to me… I have another errand for you to undertake.”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu nodded her head, hoisting the limp

Orihime up in her arms. “As you wish.”

With that she left the room, Orihime still mentally screaming in her grasp as she made her way silently along the corridors to the 12-Bantai’s deepest confinement cell.

As she lay Orihime down on the floor, she paused, eying her for a moment with a flicker of regret in her dark eyes as she deftly fitted spirit-draining cuffs to each of the girl’s wrists.

“Stay here and don’t cause any problems.” She murmured. “Mayuri-sama won’t hurt you, so long as you do that.”

Orihime stared at her, wishing she could make her frozen vocal chords function, but she could not even so much as croak, and Nemu sighed.

“The Quincy will come to save you.” She said softly. “That’s the kind of person he is. Just stay quietly and wait. He’ll come for you soon enough and then Mayuri-sama will let you go.”

She got to her feet, glancing at Orihime for a moment, then turning on her heel and leaving the cell. There was the click of the lock being fastened, and Orihime was left alone.

Despite herself, frustration welled up inside of her as she realised she couldn’t even cry.

Don’t come here, Ishida-kun. Please, whatever he says to you, don’t come here. I got myself into this trouble and I’ll get myself out — somehow, I’ll find a way to get out. So don’t come worrying about me, Ishida-kun. If you do… you might never be able to be Ishida-kun again!

“Renji and Byakuya are back.”

Ichigo dropped down from his perch on the roof of the 6-Bantai training gymnasium, dusting himself down as he did so. “Byakuya’s got a funny look on his face — like he sniffed somethin’ nasty — an’ Renji looks hacked off as well. I guess whatever they went to find out this morning, they didn’t find it out.”

“I wonder if it has to do with last night.” Rukia drew her knees up to her chest, looking troubled. “When that guy collapsed outside of the squad grounds, whatever it was he said had Nii-sama pretty alert and for him and Renji both to go in person without telling us anything… I don’t know about you, Ichigo. But I get the distinct

impression something's up."

"This is Soul Society. Somethin's always up." Ichigo said ruefully. "But now they're back, we can find out what. I'm fed up of Byakuya's tellin' us to keep to barracks all the time, in any case. If it wasn't that he seemed to know some shit about Ishida…"

"I think Nii-sama wants to help, but he is being high-handed." Rukia sighed. "Or maybe he thinks you're less trouble if you're here and I'll have less to do to keep you in line. The Sou Taichou gave me that responsibility, after all — it's probably that as much as anything else."

"We're one big inconvenience to him, in fact." Ichigo responded dryly. "I get it. I've been tiptoin' around him an' playin' it by his rules so far for Ishida's sake, but I'm gettin' a mite twitchy, to be honest. If something is going on… we ought to be in the know."

"It's somewhat comforting to know that I'm not the only one who's being left in the dark." Uryuu put in from his corner beneath a shady elm tree, setting his book aside as he fixed them both with a pointed look, and Rukia shot him a sheepish smile.

"I didn't think you'd want to know that this Shizuki guy killed folk." She said frankly. "I guess after you went nuts and blew up a building, I didn't want to give you any more triggers."

"And like I said to Kurosaki, I'm not mentally unstable and I don't need to be protected." Uryuu said coldly. "The sooner I know all the facts, the sooner I can get some answers."

"Well, you know all we know, now." Ichigo said matter-of-factly. "An' it ain't a whole lot, to be honest."

"Are you kids sitting around doin' nothing again?" At that moment, Renji strode into the yard, casting his gaze around at their various sprawled positions as he did so. "Yeesh, do you expect us t'do all the dirty work, or what?"

"Your Captain seems to have an objection to any of us walking round Seireitei without a nanny." Ichigo said bluntly. "Where did you go to anyway, Renji? You've been rushing round since last night an' noone's told us anything. Is this to do with our bein' here or somethin' totally different?"

"Depends on how you view different." Renji said cryptically. "One of my comrades got KO'ed in his own basement last night, an' his whole squad didn't come off too much better. We went t'see him… fortunately he's okay this mornin', else I'd be usin' Zabimaru t'cut the

perpetrator a new gullet."

"A comrade?" Ichigo looked startled. "Someone we know?"

"Kira." Renji dropped down opposite him, crossing his legs as he met the other Shinigami's gaze with a fed up one of his own.

"Kira? As in Kira-fukutaichou?" Rukia blinked, and Renji nodded.

"That's the blond haired guy who was with us the other day — the one who had Shizuki's name in his notes, right?" Ichigo's ears pricked up at the sound of the familiar name, and Renji nodded again.

"That's the one." He said heavily. "I thought that we'd got past the trait of Soul Society's folk knockin' over their own to get the prize, but I guess I overestimated. Either way, he an' his squad were attacked an' poisoned with some hallucinogenic stuff or other which means not only were they out for the count, none of them remember clearly what hit them. Kira was the worst hit, an' he wasn't breathin' when I found him… it makes me angry that someone'd gamble someone else's life in exchange for a lousy piece of dead treasure."

"Sounds like one hell of a night." Ichigo said ruefully. "But the guy's all right, right?"

"He is." Renji nodded. "Dizzy an' a shade hungover this mornin', but yeah, he'll live."

Uryuu frowned, a troubled look crossing his dark blue eyes.

"Abarai-kun… the dead treasure you mentioned…" He murmured, and Renji glanced at him in surprise.

"Hello, Ishida's here too." He realised. "You're hidin' under that tree, you know — an' with your feeble ass reiatsu at the moment, I didn't even notice you."

"The feeling's mutual." Uryuu said archly. "But about that dead treasure…"

"It's nothing." Renji flicked his hand dismissively. "Jus' some ancient Soul Society stuff in a vault beneath 3-Bantai. Nothin' you kids need to worry about. The Taichou's takin' it in hand, in any case."

"Renji…?" Rukia shot him a quizzical look, and Renji frowned, shaking his head.

"Byakuya doesn't want you to talk to us, is that it?" Ichigo demanded, and Renji shook his head.

"It ain't like that. It's just…"

“It’s *me* that Byakuya-san doesn’t want to know about it.” Uryuu said astutely. “Abarai-kun wouldn’t have said a word about it if he’d realised from the start that I was with you. But he didn’t. And now he doesn’t want to talk about it any more.”

He shrugged, getting to his feet as if to leave.

“It’s all right, in any case, Abarai-kun.” He said evenly. “I already know what it was that was stolen. It doesn’t take Einstein to figure it out. Kira-san was busy searching for the sword belonging to Shizuki Ametatsu. Hassuiryou. Right? And I’m guessing he found it, somewhere beneath 3-Bantai. But then he was attacked. And that’s what was stolen. Wasn’t it?”

Renji eyed him for a moment, then he sighed.

“If the Taichou finds out I told you, I’m in the shit.” He said at length. “He’s in a bad mood… no, that’s an understatement. He’s in a friggin’ homicidal mood. So keep your lip buttoned, all right? It’s for your own good, trust me — the less you know about Shizuki Ametatsu the better.”

“That’s a little difficult.” Uryuu hesitated, then sank back down beneath his tree. “Considering the situation.”

“Well, even so, it ain’t like you need to go prying into his life and his background.” Renji amended. “Seriously, Ishida. Let it alone as much as you can. Taichou’s working on a solution. Ukitake-taichou even got involved, too. We’ll find an answer. But you need t’keep out of it. It’ll put you in danger — I ain’t kidding.”

“I don’t need to be protected.” Uryuu stiffened, and Ichigo sighed, rubbing his temples.

“Will you stop friggin’ saying that?” He demanded. “Obviously you do, or you wouldn’t be in this position!”

“If it wasn’t for that twisted bastard at 12-Bantai, I wouldn’t *be* in this position.” Uryuu snapped back. “If Byakuya-san wants answers, he should be taking that place apart with a fine tooth comb. If anyone’s got the sword, it’s going to be that guy. And whatever he intends to do with it — you can bet that it’s not good.”

“Kurotsuchi?” Rukia looked startled. “You think *he* has the sword?”

“Think? No. I’m certain of it.” Uryuu said darkly. “Even without a smoking gun. A poisoned Vice Captain? Good enough for me. I keep telling you. He’s as wound up in this as he could be, right back to the start.”

Renji sighed, rubbing his temples.

“Taichou and I think so too.” He admitted, and Rukia let out an exclamation.

“For real?” She demanded. “I know Kurotsuchi-taichou’s a bit eccentric but… dammit, Renji, you said Kira almost died last night!”

“Spoils of progress, I suppose he’d call it.” Uryuu said acidly. “The first time I encountered Kurotsuchi, he killed a group of his squad members in an attempt to entrap Inoue-san and myself, in order for him to dissect us. More specifically, for him to dissect Inoue-san. That’s not eccentric. That’s psychotic. There’s a big difference.”

“Speakin’ of which, where *is* Inoue, anyway?” Renji glanced around him. “Surely the little ditz didn’t get lost walkin’ seven blocks.”

“Inoue?” Ichigo frowned. “What are you talking about, Renji? Inoue’s in the Real World. Why would she be here?”

“Because Ukitake-taichou brought her back with him.” Now it was Renji’s turn to look befuddled. “Taichou sent her back here with a message for Rukia that we’d be back soon. Ukitake-taichou had one of his attacks, an’ I guess the Taichou was a bit sharp with her — but she seemed to be headin’ here in any case. I told her you were here, Ichigo — an’ that she’d do best comin’ to find you.”

“Inoue’s in Soul Society?” Rukia exchanged glances with her companions. “She hasn’t been here, Renji. None of us have left the barracks today. And Inoue certainly hasn’t shown up here.”

“Ishida, can you sense her reiatsu?” Ichigo asked anxiously, and Uryuu frowned, genuine anxiety flickering in his dark blue eyes. Slowly he shook his head.

“No.” He admitted. “I can’t. Maybe I sensed something when she came through the gate, but my senses have been so all over the place of late I didn’t really think much about it. But now I try to find her… I can’t. Abarai, are you quite sure she’s here in Soul Society?”

“Positive.” Renji nodded. “The Taichou can back me up, too. She’s here, all right. Ukitake-taichou brought her here for your benefit, Ishida. So I don’t see why she’d have gone anywhere else.”

“For *my* benefit?” Uryuu’s features flooded red with embarrassment. “Why on earth?”

“Because, apparently, when you go nuts, you think she’s that guy’s chick, Niji.” Renji shrugged. “Seems mental t’me too, but Ukitake-taichou seemed t’think if she was around, she might be able t’calm

things down if they got heated. He put his health on the line to do it, so I guess he's seriously worried about something."

"I don't think it's a good thing for me to spend any time around Inoue-san when I'm not in control of my faculties." Uryuu said soberly, meeting Ichigo's gaze briefly, and Ichigo nodded his head.

"I agree." He said frankly. "But for the time being, if she's here… where *is* she? She's dizzy sometimes, true enough — but it's not like she has no sense of direction. Plus, she can sense reiatsu — much better than I can. She'd know where to find me, even if she couldn't pick up on Ishida's feeble signal at the moment. So she'd have come right here. Wouldn't she?"

"Unless something happened to her on the way." Rukia's brows knitted together. "Renji, if Ukitake-taichou brought her back, does that mean that he manipulated the Gate to re-open back in 13-Bantai's territory?"

"Yes. In the old training grounds, I think." Renji nodded. "Ukitake-taichou looked half dead when he came to speak to us, too — so I guess it wasn't an easy trip. But we got kinda distracted when he started coughing. Even the Taichou was worried."

"*Even* the Taichou, Renji?"

Byakuya's calm, cool question struck silence across the group of teenagers, and Renji winced as his Captain stepped out into the sunshine, eying them all disdainfully.

"You really do need to learn to either sense my coming or curb your tongue, Vice Captain Abarai." He said softly. "What, pray, might I have been so worried about?"

"Ukitake-taichou, sir." Renji recovered his wits, a rueful expression on his face. "When he collapsed."

"Ukitake is foolish and overly sentimental." Byakuya said frankly. "He jeopardises his health and the security of his division when he takes reckless gambles of that nature. Today you saw the proof of it for yourself."

"Nii-sama, has Inoue been with you?" Rukia asked softly, and Byakuya looked surprised, casting her a quizzical glance.

"Inoue? Inoue Orihime?"

"Yeah." Ichigo nodded. "Renji said she was heading to us here — but she never arrived. None of us have seen her… and we can't pick up her reiatsu, either."

Byakuya's brows knitted together.

"I am quite sure I instructed her to come here." He said, an irritated look entering his grey eyes. "Surely she cannot have mistaken her way? It is such a short distance, really, between 13-Bantai and 6-Bantai, and I am sure she has done the trip before."

"We were worried that something might've happened to her." Renji admitted. "Otherwise we'd at least be able to pick up where she was."

"Something?" Byakuya eyed him quizzically. "Such as…?"

"Perhaps someone between here and 13-Bantai decided they wanted a new research subject." Uryuu said bitterly, and Ichigo stared at him in alarm.

"Shit… you think that Kurotsuchi guy grabbed her?"

"He's sick enough to. And he's wanted to study her since he met her the first time. That's why I sent her away from the fight. Because if I didn't beat him, he'd have grabbed her. And she's not as good at fighting as I am… or at least, was."

"Accusations without evidence are not worth the breath they use." Byakuya said cautiously. "Be careful, Quincy. Whether you have reason behind your suspicion or not — there is no proof that Inoue Orihime has even been abducted, let alone…"

"Then let's go and look for her." Ichigo said firmly, getting to his feet. "If you're busy, Byakuya, then let us do it. We can split up an' meet back here in a coupl'a hours. If she's wanderin' round someplace, we'll find her. An' if not…"

Byakuya sent Ichigo a chilling look, making no attempt to respond, and Ichigo sighed, rolling his eyes heavenwards.

"*Kuchiki-taichou*, then." He said wearily, emphasising each syllable as he did so. "Whatever. It's better than sitting round here, anyway. An' we know our way around better'n you think. We ain't goin' to go fightin' anyone, you know. We just want to track down Inoue. That's all. You ain't goin' to kick off about that, are you?"

"With a Bankai like yours, Kurosaki Ichigo, and with the current state of your Quincy friend, do you wonder that I have reservations about allowing you free reign around Seireitei?" Byakuya asked softly. "The Sou Taichou appears to have entrusted you to Rukia. Rukia is my sister, therefore the responsibility also falls to my squad. And I will not have 6-Bantai disgraced by ryoka acting on impulse. Do you understand?"

“What do you mean, with a Bankai like mine?” Ichigo protested, and Byakuya’s eyes narrowed to near slits.

“You understand my meaning perfectly.” He said crisply.

“Nii-sama, I think we should look for Inoue.” Rukia spoke up now. “We could split up and go in pairs… if Renji came with us too, that would be two and two, after all.”

Byakuya shook his head.

“Renji is quite capable of searching for the girl without supervision.” He said frankly. “*You* may accompany Kurosaki Ichigo, Rukia, and ensure his behaviour does not put anyone at risk. Ishida Uryuu remains here, however.”

“What?” Uryuu’s eyes opened wide with disbelief. “Byakuya-san, what are you… Inoue-san is my friend too, you know! And I’m not going to hurt her! Dammit, if something’s happened to her, it’s probably on my account in any case! Ukitake-san brought her back here for my benefit — that’s what Abarai said! If I don’t go… if I just sit here… what the hell use am I, if I just wait behind?”

“What, precisely, do you propose to do, Quincy?” Byakuya asked crushingly. “You have no *reiryoku* if you should encounter trouble. And you are currently unstable. I cannot guarantee you will not act out a second time — or that other people, possibly including the girl, could be hurt. You will stay here. My decision is final.”

Uryuu’s eyes narrowed, and he shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Byakuya-san, but I’m not one of your squad Shinigami to be ordered around like that.” He said coldly, pushing his spectacles further up his nose as if to emphasise his point. “I’m a Quincy, regardless of what form I might be here under at the moment. And as a Quincy, I *swear* it… if Inoue-san is in trouble, I *will* go and find her. If Inoue-san needs my help, I *won’t* sit back and do nothing about it!”

Ichigo’s eyes widened at this sudden, petulant outburst, and Byakuya sighed, shaking his head.

“Renji.” He said softly. “Will you please take Ishida Uryuu down to the holding cells and secure him within one of them?”

“*What?*” Now Rukia was on her feet. “Nii-sama, surely you aren’t going to…”

“Rukia, it’s for his own sake.” Renji said gruffly, obediently getting to his feet and advancing on the bewildered, indignant Quincy.

“You too?” Rukia stared at Renji in disbelief. “You’re going to just… you can’t lock him up!”

“Rukia’s right.” Ichigo took a hand. “Ishida’s not a prisoner. And he’s got as much right as anyone to go find Inoue. Byakuya, you’re acting outta line. This is…”

“This is *my* squad headquarters, and *I* make the decisions.” Byakuya’s eyes glinted dangerously as he turned to glare at Ichigo. “Insubordination will not be tolerated. I have given my instructions. Renji, do as you have been bidden. Then you have my leave to go and search for the girl. Rukia, if you can keep Kurosaki under control, you may leave here also. For the time being, however, if the Quincy refuses to obey my instructions, he will have to be made to obey them.”

“Let go of me!” As Renji grabbed Uryuu firmly by the shoulders, the Quincy struggled, but his lean frame was no match for the Vice Captain’s brawn and Renji shot him a rueful look, even as he pulled the boy’s arms behind his back.

“It’d be a lot easier for both of us if you didn’t fight.” He said frankly. “Trust me, I don’t like it either. But the Taichou’s right. It ain’t safe for you t’be out there. So come quiet like a good boy, huh? We’ll find Inoue. You jus’ sit tightly an’ wait.”

“Like hell am I going to sit quietly!” Uryuu continued to struggle, fighting to land a kick on Renji’s knee-cap, and Renji sighed, shaking his head. Deftly he brought his hand down against the base of Uryuu’s skull, and in a moment the boy flopped limply over his arm.

“Renji!” Rukia’s eyes almost fell out at this. “What are you *doing*?”

“He’ll hurt himself if he tries t’fight me, an’ I don’t need a visit from his alter ego into the bargain.” Renji said briskly. “You do as Taichou says. Take the strawberry here an’ get goin’. I’ll follow behind soon as I’ve seen Ishida safe. Don’t look so horrified, dammit! It’s for his own good.”

With that he was gone, Quincy in arms, and Ichigo muttered a curse under his breath.

“Why did you do that?” He demanded, wheeling on Byakuya indignantly. “Ishida’s going to be hell when he comes round — why won’t you let him come search with us? Even if he did kick off, don’t you think one of us could calm him down?”

Byakuya eyed him for a moment, his eyes unreadable. Then,

“It is not your concern.” He said frankly. “If you are worried about your friend, go search. Leave 6-Bantai’s affairs to 6-Bantai.”

“Nii-sama, please… answer Ichigo’s question.” Rukia begged. “I don’t understand… why would you order Renji to lock him up? And why would Renji do it? It doesn’t make sense.”

Byakuya sighed, but Rukia’s plea had turned the scale, and he spread his hands.

“Ishida Uryuu is the reincarnation of the Shinigami known as Shizuki Ametatsu. There is no doubt.” He said quietly. “While the sword remains missing, with location and motive unknown, he is in danger. If he remains here, I believe noone would be foolish enough to attack. Certainly few individuals would choose to encounter Senbonzakura by breaking into my squad buildings the same way as 3-Bantai was recently penetrated. However, as soon as he leaves here, it is a different matter. I am trying to prevent him from being killed. If you have an objection to that, please, voice it now.”

“Is the sword really that dangerous?” Ichigo asked softly, and Byakuya shrugged.

“I hope we will not come to find out.” He said frankly. “Ukitake said that Ishida should not be brought in contact with the sword, and I concur with his opinion. Ukitake also saw the sword in action, and understands what it is capable of. I cannot take the risk that Ishida Uryuu may be able to use that sword in the same way as Shizuki Ametatsu did. And if he did… there would be no choice but for Seireitei to bring him down.”

Chapter Twenty One: The Dragon's Soul

Chapter Twenty One: The Dragon's Soul

So, it was that time of year again.

Ukitake pulled his haori *more firmly over his black* hakama *against the cool wind, strolling out across the green training lands beyond Seireitei's immediate confines. A nostalgic smile crossed his sallow face as he remembered the induction ceremony of the night before. As ever, he had seen in the welcoming of this year's most promising graduates to the Gotei 13, and, as ever, he was looking forward to finding out what each of the newest members of 13-Bantai had to offer.*

As he reached the edge of a woodland clearing, he paused, aware of the flickering reiatsu of someone training alone with their blade. He frowned, stepping carefully down the uneven incline as he followed the fluctuating traces, trying to place who the individual might be. As he turned the corner, however, he saw the Shinigami for himself, surprise glittering in his dark brown eyes as he recognised one of the previous evening's group of newcomers.

The youngster was engrossed completely in his work, his polished silver blade clutched tightly in his left hand as he practiced over and over again the different moves and strikes he had learnt over the course of his years in training. He was probably around eighteen or nineteen in physical years, Ukitake decided, and not overly well built for his age, standing a good few inches beneath the Captain himself. Yet there was a lean determination to his narrow frame, and with a jolt Ukitake remembered who the youngster was.

Shizuki Ametatsu, the graduate from Rukongai.

He smiled, folding his arms loosely across his chest as he approached the young Shinigami carefully.

He had heard much about this boy from the sticks. Though he had come from one of Rukongai's rougher districts, he had held his own in classes and had shown a natural predisposition towards the art of Kidou, as well as being one of the few in his year to succeed in summoning and mastering the spirit of his zanpakutou *before he had reached graduation. He had graduated third in his class, and had been easily accepted into the Gotei-13 with high marks across the board. Ukitake distinctly remembered that the boy had applied specifically for placement within 13-Bantai.*

Ukitake had wondered at the decision then, though he knew that, with the boy's Rukongai roots, not all of the existing Captains would be as tolerant to his rough edges as he would, and deep down he suspected that his experience may well have been the deciding factor. Perhaps, in the end, he had simply hoped to join a squad where he would not be pre-judged before he had had a chance to make his own niche. Even though the Sou Taichou had founded his Academy to be open to all, the 13-Bantai Captain was not naive enough to believe that it was easy for anyone from outside of Seireitei's tiered noble families to make it into a squad. Over the years, Ukitake had heard occasional banter between his comrades about the laziness and unsuitability for office of children from Rukongai, after all.

Yet, even though it was just past dawn, the boy was out here, training even before orders had been given.

That kind of endeavour impressed Ukitake, although it did not surprise him. Contrary to the belief of some of his less experienced colleagues, in the years he had been a Captain, he had seen many Shinigami from Rukongai working doubly hard to prove to themselves and to those around them.

And Shizuki had, after all, been the only Rukongai kid to graduate with his class.

"You're up early this morning, Shizuki." He said, moving across the grass towards his new recruit, and at the sound of the Captain's voice, the boy faltered, turning and staring at his companion in surprise. A moment later he reddened, bowing his head hurriedly as he realised how rude his staring must have been, and despite himself Ukitake chuckled, shaking his head.

"I… I… I'm very sorry, Ukitake-taichou. I didn't know you were there."

"It's quite all right. I'm the one who's disturbed your concentration, so I'm the one who should apologise." Ukitake told him easily. "I didn't expect anyone to be out here this early in the morning — especially considering the events last night."

"I guess I wanted to get a feel for what it was really like, being in the Gotei-13 at last." Shizuki reddened again, looking self-conscious. "Is it a bad thing? I mean, is it… are we not allowed to do that, on our own, without Captain's orders?"

"You're perfectly welcome to use your free time in the way you choose, so long as you're not causing trouble for anyone." Ukitake assured him. "Though you don't need to prove yourself in any way now you're here, Shizuki. You're as valid a member of the squad as any of your fellow newcomers. In fact, of those, you're the one who graduated the most highly. Your Gotei placement was never in any doubt."

"I…" Shizuki faltered, trailing the tip of his weapon against the ground, and Ukitake's clever eyes took on a look of comprehension.

"Or do you feel under pressure, because of your roots compared to your fellows?" He asked softly. Shizuki started, then shrugged his shoulders.

"It's always been twice as much work to prove I can do the things everyone else can." He said honestly. "So I guess I just got into the habit of working twice as hard. Maybe I don't have to prove myself, now… but I've felt like I did have to all through training. So I suppose old habits die hard."

"Well, working hard is not a bad thing, and I wouldn't criticise you for it." Ukitake looked amused. "My concern is that you're capable of carrying out your duties and that you do so in a ready, efficient and happy manner. I don't care whether you came from the worst district in Rukongai or one of the four noble families. You are a member of this squad now. That's your identity."

A flush of pleasure touched Shizuki's cheeks at this, and he nodded his head.

"And I mean to stay here and do the best I can." He agreed eagerly. "I wanted to be in 13-Bantai, after all, so I thought, if I really worked hard…"

"May I ask why?" Ukitake asked softly, and Shizuki blinked.

"I'm sorry, sir? I don't understand."

"Why are you so keen to be in 13-Bantai?" Ukitake eyed him keenly. "Most new recruits don't specify a preference, unless they have distinct family connections to one or other of the existing squads. You don't have anything like that… and though I don't object to your interest, I don't really understand your motivation."

"Oh." Shizuki glanced at his weapon, holding it up so that it caught the light. "It's because of this, Taichou. Because of my zanpakutou*."*

"Your zanpakutou*?"*

"Yes." Shizuki nodded his head. "Taichou, I remember last year when some of us were beginning to work with our swords and so on, you and Kyouraku-taichou came to the Institute and gave a demonstration regarding different forms of a zanpakutou *and different styles of release. And I guess it was since then. I'd already learnt a bit about my blade by then, you see. And then when you came, too… it seemed to be an obvious decision."*

He smiled.

"Your zanpakutou *is Sougyo no Kotowari, isn't it?" He added eagerly, as Ukitake nodded. "A* zanpakutou *which combines the elements of water and electricity to create lightning and storms and so on? One of the only* zanpakutou *to operate as two blades? I remember vividly how everyone stared when you split it into two right in front of us."*

"It's in that line, yes." Ukitake was completely confused now. "You're not mistaken. But I believe Kyouraku and I only showed you students the barest minimum of what our swords could do. It wasn't as though either of us pushed the boat out… it wouldn't have been safe to go into full blown Captain's level Shikai in front of so many novices. Not even final year students on the verge of becoming fledged Shinigami."

Shizuki glanced at his blade once more, then ran his finger gently over the smooth, glittering metal.

"My zanpakutou*'s name is Hassuiryou." He said softly. "Eight Water Dragons. That's what it's called."*

"Hassuiryou?"

"Yes." Shizuki nodded. "It's an elemental type too… it has a connection to rain and storms and… and it's the same kind of blade as Sougyo no Kotowari. Although… although it's not as impressive as I'm sure Sougyo no Kotowari is when fully released, I hoped that maybe I'd get the chance to train with someone whose weapon was in the same line as my own."

"I see." Understanding flooded Ukitake's features. "You thought that, if you joined 13-Bantai, it might help you to learn more about the options with your own sword?"

"Something like that." Shizuki looked embarrassed. "Was that presumptuous of me, Taichou?"

"No, it shows good sense." Ukitake shook his head. "Though you do know, I hope, that most everything Hassuiryou will ever do will come from inside of you. I may be able to help you in some ways, but at the end of the day, a zanpakutou*'s strength is about the bond between it and the man who wields it — and the strength that man has in wielding it. Do you understand?"*

"Yes… yes, sir. I think so."

"Then will you show me, please, Hassuiryou's Shikai?"

"I…" Shizuki bit his lip, then he nodded his head.

"Yes, sir." He agreed resolutely, lifting his right hand and running his index finger once more over the blade. As a faint glitter of azure light surrounded his body, he closed his eyes and Ukitake pursed his lips,

noticing how the glimmer of light on the silver metal had become somehow more fluid, like river ripples in the morning sun.

"Fure, Hassuiryou." *Shizuki murmured, and all at once the blade's ripple effect shone out across the small copse, as piece by piece the ordinary looking sword narrowed and curved into a razor-sharp point at the end, glittering brightly as though its very surface was made of water. The azure guard slowly spread and extended into two curled wings, the surface beginning to form itself into delicate sapphire scales. Ukitake eyed it pensively, noting the fluidity of the instrument's new appearance. Though it remained in one piece, he reflected, it appeared as though in an instant it could shatter into tiny shards, and that only the power of Shizuki's well controlled reiatsu was holding it all in place.*

"That's Hassuiryou's initial released form?" He asked quietly, and Shizuki nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"And in that form, what can your zanpakutou *accomplish?" Ukitake put a casual hand on the hilt of his own weapon. "If I was to draw Sougyo no Kotowari, how would you defend yourself against me?"*

"I… I don't want to fight against you, sir." Shizuki said hastily. "It wouldn't be right… and well…"

"Then imagine that old, dead tree is your opponent." Ukitake suggested, releasing the grip on his zanpakutou. *"I'm curious, to be truthful. I hadn't realised that one of my squad's new recruits could have a blade so elementally close to my own. I can feel it, now it's released, resonating against my senses. True, it's still raw and young and in need of training but even so, I can feel it. It's almost as though it's able to reach out to my own* zanpakutou *because of their similarities in features."*

Shizuki hesitated for a moment, then he nodded.

"If that's an order, sir, I'll do as you say." He agreed seriously, raising his right hand once more and brushing it loosely across the liquid surface of his weapon.

"Ryuu no Baratsuki*!" He exclaimed, and at his touch the blade glittered and shattered into droplets of water, spilling out into the atmosphere. As Shizuki cast his right hand out towards the tree, the droplets followed his command, and though they fell with all the delicate force of water, as they hit the surface of the tree, Ukitake was aware of splintering and penetration as the shards of metal embedded deep within the water droplets pierced through the aging trunk's thick skin.*

"So you create a shower of sword shards?" He murmured, moving

forward to touch the tree gingerly. "This has stood here for generations, and few can cut through its thick bark. But your blade is capable of piercing its way through because of the combination of sharp metal and slick water? Is that it?"

"Yes, sir. I think so, sir." Shizuki nodded. "It pulls the water from the atmosphere and bonds with it — at least, that's what Hassuiryou taught me. I don't know why, exactly, but it's like the blade and the water are magnetised somehow. I guess there's a lot I still don't know about it, really."

"Magnetised?" Ukitake pursed his lips thoughtfully. "From your reiatsu?"

"Maybe." Shizuki shrugged. "So long as the blade is coated with water, I can control its movements exactly. At least, I can direct where the shards go and what they hit. But if I run out of water, then they become useless."

"I see why you did not want to launch such an attack at a living target, when there is still plenty of dew on the ground for you to draw on." Ukitake turned to face him. "Although Sougyo no Kotowari would have been able to counter it, since your blade relies on water to guide it, and mine is capable of controlling water. In that respect, if your strength and mine were equal, we would probably reach an impasse."

"I… suppose so." Shizuki frowned. "I didn't think of it like that."

He smiled ruefully.

"Though they're far from equal, Taichou. Even if you went easy on me, you'd disarm me pretty quickly."

"Perhaps." Ukitake returned the smile. "But I've been doing this a long time. And I never believe in overkill. I use the strength necessary where it's appropriate to use it, but if there are other ways around the problem, I like to consider those too. Your skill with your sword is one thing, but you should also keep in mind the fact that a fight might be avoidable. And there's no sense inflicting injury if words can do the job just as well."

Shizuki nodded.

"My final year tutor said that was the kind of Captain you were, when I asked him whether he thought I had a chance of joining 13-Bantai on graduation." He admitted. "It made me even more sure I was doing the right thing. You didn't seem like a Captain who would do anything but help me, and besides, I feel the same way."

He shrugged.

"In class, sometimes, some of the richer kids would try and make trouble

with me." He added. "But I didn't fight them, even if they were really getting on my nerves. Unless it was a class or a training session, I didn't want to."

A wry look touched his expression.

"Growing up in Rukongai, I could've blacked eyes and blooded noses even before bringing Hassuiryou into the equation." He added. "But I knew then I'd've been doubly punished, so I held off. I didn't want t'be kicked out — I didn't have anyone to fight my corner for me, after all."

He raised his hand slowly, as the shards of metal pulled back from the tree, reforming themselves into a blade.

"I can't hold them out like that for very long, yet. Two attacks or a few minutes at most, before the blade has to come back together and re-gather water and reiatsu." He explained. "Maybe, eventually, it won't matter, but it seems to take a lot of energy when there are so many shards flying around. And it's not a technique I want to lose control of."

"No, indeed." Ukitake looked thoughtful. "That you can release your blade so freely and control a Shikai level attack when you've only just graduated the Academy is already an achievement, however. Not all graduates manage to do that so cleanly and easily — Hassuiryou must have formed a close bond with you already."

"I guess he's a bit rough around the edges, and likes to work hard. Like me." Shizuki said ruefully, and Ukitake laughed.

"I like to know what my new recruits are about as soon as possible." He admitted. "Perhaps it's a sign of my age, but I've learnt over the years that it's better to ask directly and see what a Shinigami can or can't do before imposing my own ideas and structuring any kind of training. Everyone is an individual, after all, and sometimes it pays to be aware of that."

He shrugged.

"Based on that fact, some of you will become seated officers in the next few weeks, no doubt." He added. "It's important for me to understand the levels you've each attained before those kinds of decisions come into play."

"Seated…" Shizuki's eyes widened in disbelief. "Already?"

"Without doubt." Ukitake nodded. "Not all Shinigami ever even manage to find the name of their zanpakutou *or wield one in Shikai, even if they train forever. You were a graduate from the top class of the Institute, however. You — and most of your former classmates — will probably become ranked officers fairly quickly, as your potential is already at a higher level than some of the others within the squad. You should aim for*

that at the very least, Shizuki."

"A… at the very least?"

"Those who graduate in the top class are those who go on to gain rank and position. Even to the point of Captain or Vice Captain." Ukitake said wisely. "Did they not tell you that, the first day you began?"

"Well yes, but… I'm…"

"From Rukongai?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't seem to make much difference." Ukitake grinned. "You have as good a reiatsu as anyone else at your particular level, noble-born or otherwise. You're willing to work hard, and you have a good rapport with your blade. Now is as good a time as any to forget the fact you came here from Rukongai. You're in Seireitei now, and you are a fully fledged Shinigami. Lack of confidence is your worst enemy from hereon in — so don't let it be one you're fighting all the time. All right?"

"I guess I'll try." Shizuki looked self-conscious. "I suppose it's defined me for so long in training, it'll take a while to shake it. Even if people didn't know my name, they still knew I was the kid from Rukongai. And I thought that, well, most squad Shinigami will be the same as the people I trained with."

"If you mean Seireitei-born, yes." Ukitake agreed. "For better or worse, it's the case. Even me, I'm afraid. I'm guilty of being one of those people as well."

Shizuki reddened, horror and embarrassment crossing his features.

"I… I didn't mean to be rude!"

"You weren't." Ukitake smiled. "Your observation was, after all, a correct one. The bulk of ranking squad Shinigami are noble-born, on account of the fact most noble-born children are possessed of a high reiatsu. Even more, rich families like to see their children shine and succeed within the Gotei-13 — so you will encounter it wherever you go from hereon. But I promise that, here at least, you won't be judged for your background. On the contrary, you should be appreciated for it. To have a reiatsu equal to any lower level noble candidate is a rare thing for a Rukongai Shinigami. You are very gifted, and if you have the commitment I think you do, I see no reason for you to go even further, should you wish."

"Really?" Shizuki looked doubtful, and Ukitake nodded.

"Yes, really." He agreed. "And it will be my pleasure to work with you on strengthening Hassuiryou from hereon in."

"Tha… thank you, sir." Shizuki nodded eagerly, as his blade shimmered and returned to its dormant form. "I know I need to practice more but it's hard to know where or when I might be able to do that yet, so I haven't. I don't want to impale anyone, after all. I think it's really quite dangerous, to be honest. And though I can only use it a little so far, I… I think one day it might be bigger than that."

"I think so too." Ukitake said gravely. "And you're right to want to control it fully before using it haphazardly. It's early to say with any certainty, either, but I highly suspect Hassuiryou will teach you more like techniques before your relationship comes to an end. The sword has a strong, vibrant aura surrounding it, which indicates that your reiryoku *is not yet at its limits. With training and practice, I think you'll find that your weapon becomes even more capable — and consequently, even more dangerous."*

"I suppose so." Shizuki glanced down at it. "When it changes, it looks like ripples on the water, somehow. The blade, I mean — it looks like it's made of rain. Do you think… is that Hassuiryou's native power? That he, one day, might control rain?"

"Well, you did say Eight Water *Dragons." Ukitake reflected. "Didn't you? I don't know what form your blade will take — that's not something that can be foreseen yet. But it does seem that rain may be the central theme surrounding Hassuiryou's power."*

"Right." Shizuki slid the blade back into its scabbard, eying his Captain apprehensively.

"Do you think that's a good thing? Or a bad one, sir?"

"Neither, particularly." Ukitake smiled. "It's a sword attuned to you, and so it will develop powers in the way you can best utilise them. It's down to you whether those powers become used for good or bad ends. Though I'm sure you're well aware of that fact already."

He glanced up at the young boy thoughtfully.

"Your name's Ametatsu, isn't it?" He asked, and Shizuki looked startled, nodding his head.

"Yes, sir. Why?"

"And you write it with the characters for 'ame' *and* 'ryuu'"?

"Yes sir." Shizuki nodded again.

“Then it seems you and your sword are both well named, considering you’ve become a team.” Ukitake reached over to touch Hassuiryou’s hilt. “A rain dragon for a Rain Dragon — yes?”

“I suppose so.” Shizuki looked surprised. “I never realised… but I suppose my name does say ‘rain dragon’, doesn’t it? Hassuiryou uses different characters, but even so…”

“Eight Water Dragons.” Ukitake murmured. “No, I’m sure there’s no coincidence. And that means Hassuiryou really does come from deep within you. You have a lot of potential, Shizuki. Don’t let go of that fact, all right?”

Ukitake opened his eyes, letting out his breath in a sigh as he gazed up at the ceiling of his bedchamber.

It had been a dream, then.

A wistful, bittersweet smile touched his lips as he remembered the eager way in which the young boy had applied himself to his training, rising before most of his companions and working exceptionally hard to master every skill and technique perfectly before moving on to the next one. He had had his weaknesses, of course, and Ukitake was not so much of a sentimental fool to have forgotten the odd instances of mischief or of rivalry with fellow squad members. But he had had potential — and now, as he had reflected so many times before, his had been a young life wasted before it had had any chance to do any good.

But now that soul exists inside another young boy, whose potential for great things is just as real. And unless all of this can be put to rights, he too might lose the chances you never let yourself have, Shizuki.

Carefully Ukitake pulled himself into a sitting position, moving gingerly so as not to excite his already aching chest into more spasms. *For Shizuki’s sake, for Kaien’s sake… this time I won’t let this feeble body of mine prevent me from doing what’s right.*

Bitterly he berated the timing of his attack — in front not only of Byakuya and Renji, but also the sensitive, gentle-natured girl from the Real World with whom Rukia had struck up such a precious friendship. He had seen the look of alarm and fright on her face, and then, the look of hurt and dejection when Byakuya had so casually dismissed her offer of help. Byakuya had not meant to hurt her, he was sure. But Ukitake knew from long years experience that the Kuchiki family were proud, cool and austere — and unless you were in their favour, you were not even worth their interest.

You try too much to be like the family model, Byakuya, and it doesn't always suit you.
Ukitake allowed himself a wry grimace.

Though I suppose I should expect nothing less from a spoiled Shinigami bocchan who was raised to stand proud over everyone else as head of the Kuchiki-ke. It's a shame Hisana didn't live for longer. I can only hope now that it'll be Rukia who does you the world of good instead.

He cast a glance around him, relieved that, for the time being, he was alone. On the stand beside his bed was the remains of the herbal soothing remedy Unohana Retsu had left him, with the stern instruction that he was to 'stay put' and 'drink it all'. Ukitake was willing to bend the rules where his body was concerned and often had, defying his own reservations and pushing on regardless of how dizzy or feverish he felt. But defying Unohana was something he had only ever done once. He had learnt very quickly that, sweet and gentle as she could be, defying her twice was not an option a wise man ever chose.

Kiyone and Sentarou were nowhere to be seen, and Ukitake knew that they too had been ordered away from his bedside in order to give him a chance to sleep. He had done so, truly exhausted by his exertions, but now, a combination of rest and the remedy had cleared the worst of his symptoms, and had it not been for the 4-Bantai Captain's unequivocal instruction, he would have risen, dressed and headed to 6-Bantai in person.

As it was, that was out of the question. However, in the absence of anyone watching him, he got cautiously to his feet, moving slowly towards his desk and pulling open the drawer as he rummaged around for paper.

"Taichou, you shouldn't be up and about!" Immediately Kiyone was on him, and Ukitake turned, realising that she had been waiting just outside his door for any sound of noise. He sighed, holding up his hands in mock surrender as he obediently sank back down onto the bed, pulling his blankets around his body.

"I have no intention of leaving this chamber." He said softly, in tones muted so as to avoid the onset of another attack. "I realise I scared you all, Kiyone, and I am sorry. But there is a note I must write. Will you bring me paper and ink, please? And when I have written it, would you take it for me to Kuchiki-taichou?"

"Yes, Taichou." Relief crossed Kiyone's features and she nodded, hopping across the chamber and picking out the things he had

requested. “I suppose Unohana-taichou wouldn’t mind you writing a letter, after all. So long as you don’t get up — I’m sure she wouldn’t object.”

Ukitake smiled, moving the empty medicine glass aside and spreading the sheet of paper out on his bedside unit.

“Thank you, Kiyone.” He murmured “I should like to be alone to write this, if you don’t mind.”

“Yes, Taichou.” Kiyone looked surprised. “I’ll wait outside — if you want me, I’ll be right there!”

With that she withdrew, and Ukitake hesitated for a moment, casting his gaze in the direction she had gone. Fleetingly he remembered the night Kaien had died, and the resultant physical strain the shock of his decimated ranks had had on his already stretched body. He had collapsed during a Captain’s meeting, he recalled bitterly, even as his colleagues had discussed the horror of that night and the need for greater security where Hollows were concerned. In the chaos that had followed, Sentarou and Kiyone had both pulled together, holding 13-Bantai firm and, somehow, becoming the mainstays and pillars of his squad from that point on. They were over-eager and featherbrained, yet Ukitake knew he would be lost without them, and he said a silent prayer of thanks to whatever spiritual force had trusted him with loyal subordinates, even despite his many failures.

At that thought, he frowned, smoothing the paper out on the unit as he lifted his brush to write.

For the sake of the future life of one of those former subordinates, he could not afford to waste any time.

Byakuya, [He wrote, the brush moving swiftly and smoothly across the paper as he allowed all his thoughts to pour onto the page.]

I know that you hoped we would have a chance to discuss these matters in greater detail, but I am aware that time is pressing and I would rather you knew everything so that you can act in the best way to prevent further tragedy. You asked me whether or not my going to the Real World was a gamble — perhaps it was, but I think it was a gamble someone needed to take. Urahara Kisuke may be, as you phrased it, a criminal and an exile in Soul Society’s eyes. But he is also one of the most scientifically astute men that I have ever been acquainted with. And for that reason, I felt it necessary to ask him about Ishida Uryuu’s current plight.

You may or may not know the exact history that exists between

Urahara and Kurotsuchi, and it is not my place to spell it out in detail. However, you are correct in your belief that Urahara, of all people, is probably the one who knows Kurotsuchi the best. Suffice it to say that when Urahara was Captain of 12-Bantai, Kurotsuchi was his third seat and his deputy in the centre for Scientific Research. Although Urahara is a canny individual and not given to admitting or denying matters he'd rather not discuss, he was surprisingly frank with me — and I am fairly certain, even considering his marginalised position, we can put faith in what he said.

In short, as you surmised, Ishida Uryuu possesses the reborn soul of Shizuki Ametatsu, former Gotei 13 Captain and, once upon a time, the Vice Captain of my own squad.

The science of reincarnation is complicated and fiddly and even after discussing it in detail with Urahara while waiting for the girl, I imagine my understanding in places is hazy. However, what I do clearly remember is that when Shizuki's posthumous sentence was passed down, orders were issued to sever his reiryoku *in the form of both his memories and his* zanpakutou *and seal them away so that — whatever his soul may become in the future, it could not repeat the mistakes it had made this time. This is even now normal practice when dealing with a convicted soul whose actions are, in the end, deemed to be the result of insanity as opposed to evil. However, Shizuki's case was unusual in one other manner. His residual soul was not rendered devoid of* reiryoku *entirely. Instead it was modified so as, whatever it became in the future, its spiritual energy would not be focused on blades and soulslaying but in some other manner entirely. This arrangement was, I confess, largely my doing. You may or may not understand that fact — but before the night that the Quincy died, Shizuki was a man in whom I had great faith and trust… and for whom, even now, I have a great fondness. You will probably not be surprised, since you knew Shiba Kaien, and know that I take the rapport between Captain and Vice Captain very seriously indeed. I suppose that, when I spoke up on Shizuki's behalf, I hoped that at some point in the future his soul might yet be able to make amends for the things done in this life. And I, perhaps, might feel a little less guilty for having let someone I taught and trained descend into such horrible despair.*

As far as I am aware — although my own health prevented me from being present — Shizuki's reiryoku *and soul matter were indeed divided into three specific sections. Firstly there was his combative power in the form of Hassuiryou. In this instance Kyouraku and your Grandfather placed binding spells on the blade's physical form before it was committed to the vault which, at that time, was housed somewhere within Central 46. Your Grandfather, as then Keeper of the Keys, was no doubt instrumental in ensuring that part of things went to plan.*

The second element was the severed memories, which were sealed and reconstituted as harmless spirit matter, becoming part of Soul Society's unreactive construction materials. And the third was released into the ether in order to be reborn into the Real World at some time in the future.

For some unknown reason — I suspect probably because of the existing imbalance between Soul Society and the Real World that had followed the Quincy situation — this rebirth did not come about for some time. Indeed, I had all but forgotten the steps that had been taken then, even if I had not forgotten Shizuki himself. The name faded from people's minds and lips, with Seireitei moving on and new Captains who had never known him coming into positions of authority. Perhaps from time to time I did consider what might have happened to my former Vice Captain. But on the whole, I simply hoped that he had found the peace he had sought in whatever new life he had been chosen to begin.

You will consider me a sentimental old fool when you read this, but Shizuki was a man of great power and potential and he died in an unecessarily tragic manner. For that reason and that reason alone I want to help Ishida Uryuu recover his own sense of self and move forward with his own life. I cannot bring Shizuki back — just as, as you have often observed, I cannot bring back Kaien. But while the Quincy boy still lives, there is a chance to help him. And that is the reason I took the gamble and pushed myself to my limits. He is a human child, after all. And we Shinigami exist to protect those human children, whatever the cost to ourselves.

In terms of the severed spirit matter, I think — and so does Urahara — that there is little doubt Ishida-kun absorbed the memory particles when he fought Kurotsuchi during his attempt to help Kurosaki-kun rescue your sister from her confinement. From the damage that area suffered, and from my limited knowledge of the Quincy's fighting techniques, that would seem to make sense. Although those memories should even so have remained as harmless construction materials — dormant and no longer capable of reacting on their own — Urahara revealed to me that,a little over a hundred years ago, he and the then newly formed Institute began certain investigations into dead spirit matter and whether or not, by a process of delicate stimulation, they could be restored into something else. Urahara says that he acted with the thought of obtaining useful data and memories from long lost members of Soul Society's past — you can draw your own conclusions as to the truth or otherwise of his statement. But when he was exiled, all of that research passed into Kurotsuchi's hands. Urahara also said that they had some limited success with re-animating the sleeping fibres — but that they were never able to perform a successful test when it came to merging these matters with existing Shinigami souls. He admitted freely having tested the idea on himself a number of times — but try as he

might, he was not able to succeed. I can only imagine that Kurotsuchi's own forays have been equally unsuccessful — and that, like a key to a door, the spirit matter is only compatible with the soul from which it was taken. Unfortunately for Ishida-kun, when he arrived here and fought Kurotsuchi in the presence of this material, he took in more than he anticipated."

For a moment he paused, letting out a sigh, then,

"*The last part of the puzzle is the* zanpakutou*, Hassuiryou, which forms the third aspect of Shizuki's dead spirit."* [He wrote sadly]. *"So long as the blade is sealed and dormant, Ishida-kun is still likely to be able to maintain control of his own mind and body. However, if he were to obtain the sword, I fear that all the elements would click into place and he would be able to use it. Not only that, but the aspects of Shizuki's past will quite probably overwhelm him. Although he was born with* reiryoku*, Ishida-kun's current situation means that that* reiryoku *is sealed within him and he himself is unable to use it. However, in Shinigami form, with the* zanpakutou *that was locked away so many years ago, there is very little doubt in my mind that Shizuki's consciousness would overwhelm the boy's completely. If that occurs, Byakuya, I feel very much afraid that the sensation will be too much for the boy to handle. He is, after all, not used to our ways and when I remember the way Shizuki was the last night I saw him, I rather fear what might occur. Equally, there is the matter of how much the spirit matter has been tampered with. From how Urahara spoke, it seems that the experiments were not as carefully carried out as they might have been… we have no way of knowing in what form they now inhabit the Quincy boy's mind.*

How much control Kurotsuchi may or may not have over these memory elements I do not know. But from what I have heard about events at 6-Bantai and 3-Bantai, I would consider it a high probability that he will at least attempt such a thing. No doubt Kurotsuchi is keen to see successful results in what has been a long-term, frustrating experiment, regardless of the cost to the boy himself. Although I have no proof of that, I know that I can trust you, at least, with my suspicions.

Please, Byakuya, that sword must be retrieved. I will happily take the blame onto my shoulders for anything that occurs in the pursuit of that end… but I am relying on you and your companions to succeed where I have so far failed. For Shizuki's sake and for the sake of that boy… I'm putting my faith in you.

Ukitake Juushirou"

Ukitake read over his words again as he waited for the ink to dry, a sense of sad nostalgia settling in his heart.

Perhaps I was wrong, after all, to beg for mercy on your soul, Shizuki. But I don't regret having done it, and I don't suppose I ever will. And if I can help the boy who you became, I'll help him. You have my word on that.

Carefully he folded the letter into three, sealing it with the mark of 13-Bantai's Captain and scribbling the four characters that made up Byakuya's name on the other side. Then he set it aside with a sigh.

"Kiyone?" He murmured, and in a moment the door slid back to reveal the young Shinigami.

He held out the letter.

"To 6-Bantai, as soon as possible." He said softly. "Please, Kiyone. I'm counting on you."

"Yes, Taichou." Kiyone took the letter, bowing her head in acknowledgement of the order. "Don't worry. I'll give it to Kuchiki-taichou myself right away!"

With that she was gone, and as Ukitake felt her reiatsu dissipating from 13-Bantai's barracks, he lay back down against his pillows, closing his eyes.

He had done all he could do, now. He'd just have to hope that there was still enough time for others to succeed.

Shinigami were beyond belief.

Uryuu opened his eyes, a dull ache throbbing across the back of his skull as he pulled himself into a sitting position. A faintly dizzy sensation assailed him and he muttered a curse, sinking back against the wall of the chamber as he struggled to make sense of his surroundings.

He had been with Kurosaki and the others, and they had been going to look for Inoue-san. Then the 6-Bantai Captain had put his foot down and instructed that gorilla Abarai to imprison him…

He frowned, as his eyes became accustomed to the dim light. The room was small and barren, and as he gained a greater appreciation of his surroundings, he realised that he had been summarily deposited on top of a thin, low-slung pallet bed against the furthest wall. Beneath his body he could the feel rough, uneven fabric of prison blankets, and across from him he was aware of a wooden chair and a narrow slab of wood that may or may not pass as a desk. There was no covering on

the walls or the floor, and only a small window at the very top of the cell let in any light. One wall was divided in half, part plaster and part thick iron bars, and even in the gloom Uryuu could make out the bulky shadow of a large, uncompromising lock.

His eyes narrowed angrily.

So this was one of 6-Bantai's holding cells, huh?

"Considering Byakuya-san's of noble blood, you'd think he'd have a better idea of hospitality than this for his guests." He muttered, swinging his legs over the side of the pallet and padding cautiously across the cold stone to the barred door. His hands had not been fastened, he realised, as he gripped the metal tightly, but as soon as he did so, he realised why Renji had not seen fit to further his ordeal.

Only an ogre or a wild bear would have the strength in their bodies to rip these bars from their sockets. They had been in place a long time and, as Uryuu gave them a frustrated shake, they evidently intended to remain put for a fair while to come.

He squinted through the gap in the metal, realising that the scenery beyond was no more inspiring than his surroundings within. A long, narrow corridor separated his row of cells from identical ones placed at intervals along the opposite side, and though the walkway itself was sparsely decorated, the grills at the window were shut, making it seem gloomy and depressing. There was noone around, and Uryuu sighed, sinking down to his knees as he debated whether he was insulted by this lack of attention or relieved by the fact noone else was there to witness his humiliation.

Imprisoned in a cell by a Shinigami Captain, who hadn't even thought him a worthwhile enough opponent to secure his hands or station someone to guard him. Inwardly Uryuu's pride resented the complacency. Yet still, he reasoned, as he glanced at his unfettered wrists, perhaps it had been done that way on purpose.

Abarai didn't resist Byakuya-san's orders, but Byakuya-san didn't tell him to tie me up. Just to confine me in a cell. And so that's what he did. Maybe he didn't intend to make it worse than it had to be — though dammit, I don't understand why all of a sudden. If Inoue-san's here and she's in danger… it's as much my responsibility as anyone else's to go find her. I can't just sit around here! Whatever those Shinigami think about it — this is my fight more than anyone's!

He scoured the room, searching for something that he could use to pry between the bars or pick the huge lock that held the door in place. It was a forlorn hope, he knew that — no Shinigami Captain worth his

salt would sanction a prison cell which contained a ready made easy-escape kit… but much as he hated to admit it, he had few options. The truth was that he did not need to be further restrained. He had no Quincy bow with which to fire the lock and set himself free. All he had was himself. And against the thickness of the prison bars, he greatly suspected that that wasn't enough.

You seem troubled, Uryuu.

The sound of the dragon's voice startled him, and he only just managed not to let out an exclamation as he glanced around in surprise.

I'm sorry… did I startle you?

"What gave you that idea?" Uryuu re-gathered his composure, his tones laced with sarcasm. "Creeping up on my mind and shouting into it… why should I find that at all startling?"

I see. So you're in that mood again today.

The dragon sighed, and Uryuu took a deep breath into his lungs, rubbing his temples as he slowly closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry." He muttered. "But how would you feel, locked away like this without being able to do anything to help?"

Trapped. Frustrated. Helpless. Worthless.

The dragon spoke gravely.

I do know, Uryuu. For two hundred years I have been so confined. I know exactly how you feel.

Despite himself, a wry smile touched Uryuu's lips.

"I suppose you have." He murmured. "So? What is it now? Did you just come to sympathise with my plight, or…?"

I came because you sought me.

The dragon sounded surprised, and Uryuu frowned.

"Sought… you?"

There's no need to sound so disgusted by the idea. I am, after all, a part of you… whether you want to acknowledge me or not.

"I didn't mean to sound disgusted." Uryuu shook his head impatiently. "But you're not a part of me. You're Shizuki Ametatsu's sword, and even if I am him reborn, I'm not a Shinigami and I don't use a sword. Besides, everyone has a bee in their bonnet about

keeping you and I apart. So why would I actively seek you? It doesn't make any sense."
I am not your enemy, Uryuu.

"I never said you were." Uryuu sighed, his head beginning to ache once more. "Look, right now, my mind is on other things. It's not that I don't like you randomly jumping on me to pour confusing rhetoric into my brain, but I'm a little occupied with trying to get out of here for the time being. One of my friends is in danger, and…"

Inoue Orihime, correct?

"If you know that, why are you bothering me?"

You are a truly silly boy, sometimes.

The dragon sounded resigned.

No wonder so many people become so easily frustrated with you. You think your spiritual ability means you can decide what is and isn't real — even control the environment around you. But it is not that simple. You want to escape this cell, yet you are too closed-minded to realise how you might be able to do it. I told you once, didn't I? Not to make Ametatsu suffer the emotions he suffered that day. But at this rate, you're determined to close your ears to me. And if you don't listen — it will not be my fault if there are adverse consequences.

"Why are you lecturing me?" Uryuu bristled. "If you know so much, damn you, tell me what you know! But stop being infuriating. Even if you are fed up with me — Inoue-san's done nothing to hurt you, and if you prevent me from helping her…"

The only one preventing you from doing anything is you, Uryuu. Must I take you back to that rainy place once more and drum that into your soul myself?

Uryuu held up his hands.

"Fine. Whatever. I give." He said heavily. "You're right, in every respect — happy? Just tell me how to get out of here so that I can damn well help Inoue-san! I know that Kurotsuchi has her — I know that he'll do horrible things to her. So I'll make a deal with you. Whatever you say I'll agree with — and you tell me how to escape this cell."

There was a long pause, and for a moment Uryuu thought that he had been abandoned once again. Then he was aware of the beast's sigh once more, those golden orbs piercing through his thoughts as though the *zanpakutou*'s spirit was reading directly into his soul.

He would want me to help you, so I will do what I can.

The voice sounded disappointed, but Uryuu ignored it, focusing instead on what the beast was saying.

If you locate Inoue Orihime you will also locate me. I understand that you are concerned for her safety — if it was not for that one saving grace, Uryuu, I would give up on this completely. But in this, you and he are the same. You too will take great risks to protect or defend one such as her — even if it puts you in grave danger. And if you go after Inoue Orihime, you ***will*** *be in great danger. With your mind closed to me like this… I cannot guarantee what malevolent forces will be able to interfere.*

"I'll take the risk." Uryuu said frankly. "She came here to help me — so it's my duty to save her. As a Quincy, I swear it. It's my responsibility."

There was another sigh, and Uryuu got the impression once again that the dragon was disappointed in him.

As a Quincy…?

"That's what I am, whether you like it or not."

Yes. I know. We are truly severed, aren't we? As strangers, despite everything that's gone before. You will not hear me, will you? Nor will you call my name. No matter how hard I try — that door is closed.

"Don't be melodramatic." Uryuu's eyes narrowed. "I *know* your name, or had you forgotten?"

That isn't what I meant.

"Then what *do* you mean?"

Ametatsu was skilled with the Shinigami art known as 'Kidou'.

The dragon was clearly ignoring his question, and Uryuu bit back his impatience, forcing himself not to snap.

"Yes, I know. I've used it… at least, he's used it… on a couple of occasions since all this began."

There is a spell called Haien *which would free you from this cell. It manifests as purple flame, and it incinerates all it touches. You are not trained in Kidou, and I do not know whether, without his interference, you would be able to use it. But if you can focus your mind and heart on it, perhaps somewhere his recollection of casting the spell would aid you. You wish to protect one you care for, after all. That in itself may be enough to harden your resolve.*

“Are you saying… that I might be able to cast a spell? That I could blow my way out of here with Shinigami magic without him taking over my mind?”

If you wish to save Inoue Orihime that badly, yes. Love is powerful in itself, Uryuu. You should not underestimate what it can achieve.

Uryuu’s face flushed red with embarrassment.

“Hey, noone said anything about…”

If you continue to deny realities to yourself, you will remain useless.

The dragon’s tone was cutting.

You lost your power because of that denial. Will you sacrifice her life for it, too?

Uryuu’s expression became one of dismay.

“But…”

You should save your breath and focus your strength on getting out of here. Not on arguing with me.

Uryuu gathered his wits, closing his eyes as he forced himself to calm down and rationalise the dragon’s words.

“You said it was called *Haien*, didn’t you?” He murmured, and he was aware of the dragon’s flicker of assent inside of his thoughts.

“And it’ll definitely set me free?”

If you use the strength and purpose Ametatsu used when he fired Kidou, then there is no doubt.

“You really think I can find that? That I can find his strength inside of me to fire some alien spell?”

You don’t need to do that. I told you. Your focus is the girl’s well being. Just be honest with yourself about your feelings, and what you want to achieve. That at least is the first step — if you truly want to leave here, there is no other way.

“Fine.”

Uryuu sighed, twisting his fingers together as he fixed his thoughts firmly on breaking the cell door. “Though if this doesn’t work, and I get arrested for real, I’ll be blaming you for it all.”

There was no reply, and Uryuu realised the dragon was once more gone from his thoughts.

For a moment he felt strangely alone, then he caught himself, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Forget about the dragon.” He muttered. “Focus on Inoue-san and on getting out of here. Whatever it takes to reach that power… I have to try. *I have to try*!”

As this thought flooded his mind, he felt something strange and warm tingle across the ends of his fingers, and his eyes snapped open in surprise, seeing the faintest flicker of purple fire haze across his touch.

“*Haien*.” He murmured. “Maybe that damn *zanpakutou* was right, after all. There’s no way I should be able to do that, not normally. But whilst Ametatsu-san is in my memories… while he’s inside of me… maybe I can do it. Maybe I can get out of here!”

Buoyed by this realisation, he redoubled his resolve, tension underpinning every nerve and tendon in his body as he drew on whatever fragments of scattered *reiryoku* he could find.

“To go and help Inoue-san. To rescue her from that sadistic monster.” He muttered fiercely, as his hands began to heat with the force of the flame. “To get out of this goddamn prison cell and show everyone that I don’t need to be protected, either! *Haien*!”

The last word he exclaimed, and as it echoed in the chamber around him, a blaze of violet flame shot forth from his fingers, engulfing the tall, thick bars in their glow. At first nothing happened but, as Uryuu poured all of his resolve into the spell, they began to slowly melt and buckle and, as the glimmering fire faded, Uryuu got shakily to his feet, reaching out to touch the resultant mangled mess.

“Kidou, huh.” He murmured, glancing at the wisps of smoke that still surrounded his charred fingertips. “Well, who’d’ve known. I’m sorry about the mess, Byakuya-san, but I’m not just going to sit still. Inoue-san is in trouble, and I’m going to rescue her no matter what.”

He paused, then stepped carefully through the damaged bars, checking the corridor cautiously for any sign of company. There was none, however, and he inwardly thanked his lucky stars for the arrogant carelessness of 6-Bantai’s confinement attempts.

“So, to 12-Bantai.” He resolved firmly, hurrying along the hallway towards the way out. “To show that bastard Kurotsuchi that you *don’t* mess with the Ishida Quincy!”

Chapter Twenty Two: For Want Of A Sword

Chapter Twenty Two: For Want Of A Sword

The human girl would about have regained use of her limbs by now.

Kurotsuchi got to his feet, glancing cursorily at the blinking, blipping screen for a moment as he took in the data readings one final time. It had been a little more than an hour and a half since he had taken Orihime hostage and, despite himself, he was beginning to become impatient. Though his scientist's nature cried out to him to forget about the Quincy and take his chance to dissect the human woman while he could, still he had forced himself to remain calm, knowing that the reward would be infinitely greater than a few salvaged DNA cells and a short-lived rush of information.

This was the culmination, after all, of something begun a long time ago. And, at long last, he would be able to see whether the theories he had so long burrowed into could be put into practical use.

Ishida Uryuu was too precious a study subject to be allowed to escape his clutches this time.

"But I don't understand why he's taking so long to find her." He said at last, frustration glittering in his golden gaze. "After our conversation the other day, and considering the boy's ability with sensing reiatsu… why hasn't he come sooner? At this rate, Nemu, I'll have to send you to physically lead him here… and I had hoped I'd not have to resort to something so ungainly and obvious."

"If you please, Mayuri-sama, the cell that holds the girl seals all reiatsu from penetrating to the outside world." Nemu said softly from where she had been monitoring a screen of her own in the furthest, darkest corner of the room. "If Mayuri-sama recalls, you had it designed that way so as Soul Society wouldn't interefere in your experiments on the souls of the Quincy."

"You stupid girl, why did you place her in there?" Kurotsuchi demanded. "Are you simple? Part of the point of this experiment is to lure the subject into the trap! If he can't sense the bait, how is he going to follow it across Seireitei?"

"My sincere apologies, Mayuri-sama." Nemu flinched back from his suddenly swinging hand. "Should I… do you want me to move the

girl?”

“No…” Kurotsuchi’s eyes narrowed until they were little more than slits. “No matter. Even if it’s not possible for them to sense where the girl is, that can still work to my advantage. The last thing I want is for someone else to get wound up in this. If I’ve judged that Quincy boy correctly — and no doubt that I have — he’s the kind who’d far rather work alone than bring his comrades into the picture. He’ll want to come and rescue her, just like he did that day we fought in Seireitei’s streets. But this time, he won’t find things going quite so easily his way. No, we’ll leave it how it is. Another twenty minutes, Nemu, and you will go and find him yourself. But for the time being… we wait.”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu sank back down into her seat, and Kurotsuchi shot her a quizzical look.

“Are you relieved?” He asked mockingly. “Are you afraid of this Quincy boy, Nemu?”

“No, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu looked startled, shaking her head.

“Then perhaps… you’re concerned about him? Or his strange human friend?”

“N… No, Mayuri-sama.”

“You are.” Kurotsuchi crossed the room, grabbing her by the long dark plait of hair and hauling her unceremoniously to her feet as he looked her directly in the eye. “You half-wit, do you think I created you to feel sorry for my research specimens? This is a laboratory, not a happy house! Or would you rather I took you to pieces again? Because if I did that, believe me, you wouldn’t be going back together in the same order as now!”

“Put her down, Kurotsuchi.”

The voice startled him, and he loosed his grip, sending Nemu tumbling to the floor as slowly he turned around, delight glittering in his golden gaze as he registered the speaker.

“Well, well.” He murmured. “So even without the scent of honey, the bee still flies into the spider’s web.”

“That’s a rather messed up analogy, if you don’t mind my saying.” Uryuu said stiffly, his expression dark and forbidding as he glared at the Captain warily. “Bees don’t follow the scent of honey. They manufacture it.”

“Tsch, so picky.” Kurotsuchi tut-tutted under his breath. “And there I was thinking I was being artistic with my words. You really don’t

have much imagination, do you, Quincy?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.” Uryuu’s eyes narrowed. “But maybe you’d forgotten… bees also come with a sting.”

“A sting?” Kurotsuchi stared for a moment, then he laughed, holding up his hands. “Ah, yes. Of course. A Quincy sting. But… what’s this? A Quincy who can’t fire a bow? Somehow I don’t think your *sting* will be too effective against me today, Ishida-kun.”

“Maybe you’ll be surprised.” Uryuu said frankly, and Kurotsuchi eyed him for a moment, taking in the faint charring around the edges of his Shinigami *hakama*. His fingers were still coated with the dark dusting of ash, and he pursed his lips, interpreting the flickers that danced across the boy’s reiatsu as he did so.

“I see.” He murmured. “That’s why I didn’t pick up your coming. You’ve been concealing your unstable reiatsu as best you can, haven’t you? Or at least, *someone* has. Even if it isn’t you.”

“What do you mean by that?” Uryuu demanded. “I didn’t come here to play games with you, Kurotsuchi! I came here to get Inoue-san! Where is she? I swear, if you’ve hurt her…”

“Hurt her?” Kurotsuchi snorted. “What do you take me for? Hurt a pretty girl? Honestly, what kind of a monster do you think I am?”

“You don’t want an answer to that.” Uryuu said blackly. “Having seen how you treat Nemu, I wouldn’t even like to guess. Where is she?”

Kurotsuchi smiled, revealing a row of pearl-white teeth.

“Nemu, go get the girl.” he said quietly. “If she can’t stand by herself, drag her along. It seems that it’s time she joined the conversation.”

“Drag her…” Uryuu’s eyes almost fell out of his head, as Nemu bowed and silently left the room to obey the command. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing significant. She still has all her relevant body parts.” Kurotsuchi said dismissively. “I only had her subjected to a mild paralysing agent so as she wouldn’t cause me any undue trouble. She’s quite unhurt, I assure you.”

Uryuu’s expression darkened.

“You took her to get me to come here, didn’t you?” He murmured, and Kurotsuchi nodded.

“I told you that you’d come when I was ready.” He said easily. “I knew I’d probably need a little incentive to get you here. Though you were surprisingly slow in coming to that conclusion, Ishida-kun. I’m disappointed in you. I had thought your senses sharper than that.”

“Don’t fool yourself.” Uryuu shook his head impatiently. “I knew it was you right away. I just… I had some trouble leaving 6-Bantai. That’s all.”

“So I see, from the traces of Kidou still lingering on your fingers.” Kurotsuchi purred, and Uryuu flinched, glancing at his hands. He shrugged.

“If you know everything, why do you need me?” He demanded.

“To put together pieces of an ancient puzzle.” Kurotsuchi told him simply. “No other reason. Like I said, I’ve no use for an empty shell of a Quincy. But I have use for you — at least, for your soul.”

“What if I don’t want to cooperate?”

“You will, though.” Kurotsuchi’s eyes darkened with a sinister, knowing gleam. “Because that’s how Quincy are. Once they give their word — once they swear on that insufferable pride of theirs… that’s the end of the game. And I will make you swear to me, here and now. I know the honour that binds your people, boy. You’re no different in that respect from any of the others I’ve studied over the years.”

“Maybe you’re wrong.” Uryuu said coldly. “I’m not exactly like all other Quincy. Most wouldn’t give Shinigami scum like you even the time of day.”

“Mm, but you have a weakness.” Kurotsuchi’s words were soft, almost hypnotically soothing as he crossed the floor towards his prey. “And that is the girl. Inoue Orihime. It wasn’t an accident that I took her, and not one of your other friends. It was opportune, perhaps, that she crossed my path so easily — but none of the others would have had the same effect. I remember, you see. I know it was Inoue Orihime who you fought to protect the last time we battled. And for that reason, I know you’ll agree to whatever I say. If I promise to release the girl unharmed, that is…”

At that moment the door at the back of the lab swung open, and Orihime stumbled into the room, Nemu close behind her. There were spirit-draining cuffs on her wrists, but it was not this, nor the dishevilled nature of the girl’s immediate appearance that seemed to strike Uryuu the most. It was the look of apprehension and fear in the big violet grey eyes, and Kurotsuchi felt a flare of satisfaction rush

through him as he realised he'd judged things to perfection.

"Well, Uryuu-kun?" He asked pleasantly. "The decision is yours. I can do either of two experiments today. The only thing to be decided is which one to pursue. Isn't it?"

"Ishida-kun, don't let him fool you!" Orihime exclaimed. "He wants to hurt you!"

Uryuu's gaze narrowed.

"Two experiments?" He asked, turning a searching gaze on Kurotsuchi, who nodded.

"I can either dissect the human girl and get to the bottom of these mysterious shield powers she possessed." He said lightly. "Or you can let me investigate further exactly what kind of *reiryoku* is burning up inside of your body."

"Don't, Ishida-kun!" Orihime was frantic now. "He wants to turn you into that Shinigami! He wants to stop you being Ishida-kun — don't let him do it!"

Uryuu was silent for a moment. Then he crossed the floor, pausing a few feet away from Orihime and meeting her gaze.

"I'm not going to let him do anything to you." He said frankly. "This is between Kurotsuchi and I, after all. It's not your problem, Inoue-san. I'm sorry you got dragged into it, but it'll be all right now. I'll make sure he lets you go."

"Ishida-kun…"

"Don't worry about me." Uryuu shook his head. "I'm stronger than he thinks I am. And I won't let him have his way so easily. Kurosaki'd not forgive me, in any case, if I let you get hurt by a madman."

"But…"

"Let her go." Before Orihime could voice any more protests, Uryuu had turned his gaze on Kurotsuchi, a pointed glower in his dark eyes. "I won't tolerate you treating her that way… let her go. You and I will settle this ourselves… it's nothing to do with her."

Kurotsuchi's expression became one of satisfaction, and he nodded.

"Nemu, release the girl's restraints." He said softly.

"You're going to let her leave, aren't you?" Uryuu asked warily, and Kurotsuchi smiled.

"Do you swear to remain here, then, even when she's gone?" He

asked silkily.

“Ishida-kun, you mustn’t!” Orihime cried, but Uryuu seemed oblivious to her, nodding his head.

“I will.” He said solemnly. “On… on the pride of the Quincy, Kurotsuchi, I swear it.”

“Then a deal is a deal.” Kurotsuchi agreed. “Nemu, ensure that Inoue Orihime leaves 12-Bantai’s premises safely. Inoue-san, I’ll advise you not to try and use your powers on my Vice Captain or any of my staff on your way out. If you do so, I will be forced to do ever more unpleasant things to your friend Ishida-kun. Do you understand?”

Orihime’s eyes glittered with tears, but, slowly, she nodded her head.

“I’ll tell Kurosaki-kun and Kuchiki-san.” She murmured. “We won’t let you get hurt, Ishida-kun. I promise.”

Kurotsuchi glanced at Nemu, who immediately grasped Orihime by the arm, pulling her forcibly from the room and out into the 12-Bantai courtyard.

Once alone, Kurotsuchi let out a sigh.

“Well, that was convenient.” He murmured, more to himself than to his companion. “But we don’t have much time. I’ve no doubt the girl will run straight back to your ryoka friends like a frightened rabbit to relate all. Still, we have a little while. Will you follow me, Ishida Uryuu-kun? There’s something deep within my lab I want you to see.”

Uryuu frowned, and Kurotsuchi saw something strange glitter in his eyes.

“Hassuiryou.” He whispered, and the scientist smiled.

“You can feel it, then, can you?” He asked curiously. “I’m impressed. To hear the call of a dead man’s *zanpakutou* is no mean feat… ah, but then, I suppose Shizuki Ametatsu isn’t as dead as he could be — now is he, Ishida-kun?”

Uryuu did not answer, and Kurotsuchi chuckled, not noticeably put out by his companion’s reticence.

“Answering is unecessary.” He reflected. “It’s clear enough from the look on your face.”

He smiled.

“Though I imagine it would’ve been a lot harder to sneak out of the

honourable Kuchiki-taichou's nest without Shizuki-san's help… correct?"

"I came here. *Uryuu*. Not Shizuki anyone. *Ishida Uryuu*." Uryuu said stiffly. "And as for Byakuya-san, he wasn't around when I left. I don't know where he went — perhaps he's going to hunt you down too, for taking an innocent girl hostage."

"Kuchiki-taichou?" Kurotsuchi snorted. "That's a vain hope. Or haven't you realised yet that the nobility only pay attention to their own needs and noone else's? Inoue Orihime is a mere human. Far, far below that one's notice."

"That seems to be the attitude of several Shinigami Captains, if you ask me." Uryuu shot back, and Kurotsuchi's eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Including Shizuki Ametatsu, perhaps?"

"I don't know. He's dead and I didn't know him when he was alive, so I couldn't tell you."

"You bluff so well I almost think you believe what you say." Kurotsuchi eyed him pensively. "But it's just there, in your eyes, giving you away. You used Kidou to escape whatever precautions Kuchiki-taichou had thought to impose to prevent you from falling recklessly into trouble. A Quincy couldn't do that. You know the name of the sword — but no Quincy cares about the name of a *zanpakutou*. You understand, I think, what's happening to you. Even if you don't want to admit it in front of me."

His voice softened.

"That's what this is about, after all." He murmured. "Believe it or not, Uryuu-kun, I care something for this stone-and-spirit particle world that you disdain so much. It gives me my reason for experimentation and creation, after all. And when one such as you crosses into my territory, of course I'm not going to ignore it. I won't pretend I don't want to study every inch of you. That's natural, I think, for a scientist of my calibre. But you are also… a threat. A danger to Seireitei as it rebuilds. Don't you think, given that, that it's careless to let you run around the streets on your own?"

"Don't pretend that any of this is in any way for Soul Society's sake." Uryuu shook his head impatiently. "I'm not as easy to convince as Inoue-san might have been. I know what a rotten soul you have underneath that clown's countenance."

His eyes narrowed.

“I never liked clowns, you know, as a kid.” He added acidly. “I guess because they were hiding their real selves behind painted smiles. You’re no different. You can say what you like, Kurotsuchi. But a man who’d torture the souls of innocent Quincy doesn’t have any good to offer Seireitei. And I should probably have killed you when I had the chance.”

“Perhaps.” Kurotsuchi acknowledged. “I wonder why you didn’t.”

He turned, gesturing towards the back door of the lab as he did so.

“Well? You gave me your word, and I know you won’t break it. *Will* you follow me, Ishida Uryuu-kun? I have something that belongs to you.”

His smile widened.

“Besides, you are mistaken. *All* the work I do is for Soul Society’s sake. For the sake of a greater fount of knowledge. For the sake of understanding things we didn’t understand before. Moving forward is something that, surely, you even do in your paltry little human world? That’s what my work is dedicated to. To answering questions that noone has ever been able to answer. How can you say my research doesn’t benefit Soul Society? Of course it does. And now you’re about to become a part of that reward — you should feel proud!”

Uryuu’s eyes darkened, but he did not respond, reluctantly following the white-coated Captain through the laboratory and into the chamber laid out with Quincy paraphernalia. He made no comment, though Kurotsuchi saw him stiffen at the sight of it. Yet as they reached the door of the hidden room beyond, the Quincy paused, and Kurotsuchi gazed at him in surprise as he felt a flicker of something dart across the boy’s reiatsu.

“Hassuiryou’s in there.” Uryuu murmured, and Kurotsuchi’s eyes widened with delight.

“So, your connection is such that you really don’t need me to tell you what lies behind that door?” He observed softly. “I see. Even before the real tests begin, I’m already learning plenty from you, Quincy. Although I should perhaps not call you that at present, should I? Because your reiatsu is screaming out for the weapon that’s concealed here… even though you might resist it, a part of you wants to reach out and take the blade in your own two hands. Doesn’t it?”

“Hassuiryou is Shizuki Ametatsu’s weapon. It isn’t mine.” Uryuu turned to face the Captain resolutely, but Kurotsuchi could see the hunger in the boy’s eyes. “I fight with a bow and arrow — as I’m sure

you remember."

"I suppose we'll see." Kurotsuchi said lightly, moving to unfasten the many bolts that kept the door shut fast. "You see, at the moment, even if you wanted to fight me — you couldn't do so. Your *reiryoku* is stunted and all over the place. You don't even know yourself which parts of you are yours or how to use the parts that are not. It's almost pitiful, really. But don't worry. I sympathise with your plight. Together we'll resolve it — won't we?"

He thrust back the door, stopping dead as he registered that the once dormant blade had begun to glitter with an azure light, the flickers dancing off its sleek silver surface as though they were droplets of rain rippling across the surface of a lake.

"Fascinating." he murmured. "Even at this distance. I was right, after all. The *zanpakutou* is the key to the lock."

"What do you intend to do with me now?" Uryuu eyed the Captain warily. "If you think you're going to get me to use that…"

"I thought you wanted to avenge yourself on me." Kurotsuchi feigned surprise. "Or would you rather resort to fists and deny your spiritual potential entirely? A noble gesture, perhaps, but an entirely suicidal one. Even Nemu could trample you in the dust at that rate."

Uryuu's brows knitted together, and Kurotsuchi gestured towards the sword.

"I brought you here so that you could get your wish." He said evenly. "I know that you want a reason to fight me a second time, Ishida-kun. This is your chance to do so. That is my experiment. To see exactly how far a reincarnated human Quincy's soul can power a Captain's *zanpakutou* in a conflict of blades."

"*What*?" Uryuu stared at him in disbelief, and Kurotsuchi shrugged.

"Of course, if you don't want to…" He murmured, and Uryuu's eyes narrowed.

"What's in it for you?"

"Aside from a good deal of valuable scientific data?" Kurotsuchi smiled. "Perhaps you aren't the only one seeking a re-match, boy. I have pride too, after all. As a Captain of the Gotei 13."

Uryuu gazed at him for a moment, as if assessing his companion's sincerity, and Kurotsuchi reached across to loosen the clasps that held the sword in place, lifting it carefully and holding it out.

“Last chance.” He murmured. “Either take it in good faith, or be knocked down and dissected where you stand. It’s your choice, boy. At least be glad that I’m willing to humour your people’s pride when it comes to facing the last of the Quincy.”

Uryuu’s eyes narrowed, and for a moment nothing moved. Then, very slowly, he reached out his fingers towards the still-glittering blade.

Kurotsuchi’s gaze glittered eagerly as the flickering sparks of reiatsu danced and jumped ever higher towards his touch, like tiny jolts of electricity as the weapon sought the master that had forsaken it two hundred years before. Uryuu flinched back at the sensation, then, as resolution crossed his expression, he nodded curtly, grasping the indigo and black bound hilt firmly in his left hand.

As he did so, light flared through the whole of the weapon, engulfing him too in its glow and he let out a cry, stumbling to his knees as the surge of reiatsu grew stronger and stronger. Kurotsuchi took a step back, greedily absorbing every tiny change in the boy’s aura as he did so.

It had been a good decision, after all, he reflected absently, to fit this chamber with such a sophisticated array of sensory devices. No doubt there would be plenty for him to review once the initial investigation was at an end.

“Well?” As the haze of blue light faded and calmed, Kurotsuchi extended a gloved hand, resting it lightly on the boy’s shoulder. “Are you ready, then, my friend?”

Slowly Uryuu raised his gaze, confusion clouding his expression as he stared at Kurotsuchi in bewilderment.

“Who… what… where…” He murmured softly, and Kurotsuchi’s grin widened in glee.

“Kurotsuchi Mayuri.” He purred smoothly. “We’ve not yet had an opportunity to talk, Shizuki-taichou. But I’m very glad, at long last, to have the pleasure of your company.”

“You… wear a *haori*.” Distress flickered in the boy’s eyes as he gingerly got to his feet, putting his free right hand to his head as if to clear it. “But… I don’t remember…”

“In comparison to you, I’m a quite new addition to Seireitei’s esteemed ranks.” Kurotsuchi said evenly. “But none of that is either here nor there. There is something much more important about which we must speak.”

“Important?” Uryuu’s eyes widened, and Kurotsuchi nodded.

“The blade I have just returned to you is yours, is it not?” He asked lightly, and Uryuu glanced down at his left hand, nodding his head as he lifted the weapon, tilting it back and forth beneath the slatted light of the lab chamber.

“Of course.” he said slowly. “But… you returned it to me? I…”

“Shall I refresh your memory for you?” Kurotsuchi asked pleasantly. “You went to 6-Bantai in search of your *zanpakutou*, I believe. There you fought against a young scaramouche with red hair and tattoos — did you not?”

Uryuu’s eyes narrowed as he processed this. Slowly he nodded.

“Yes.” He admitted. “I remember. But… of late… so many memories seem confused. Like I don’t have any recollection of what I’ve been doing, where or even… even *why* I’ve been acting that way. Since I left the Real World, nothing has made any sense to me whatsoever.”

“Since you left the Real World… and Niji?” Kurotsuchi asked softly, and Uryuu’s eyes widened in dismay.

“What do you know about Niji?” He demanded anxiously, wheeling on the Captain and for a moment Kurotsuchi thought his companion might swing his weapon recklessly just at the sound of her name. He tut-tutted, shaking his head slowly.

“And Ukitake-taichou told me you were such a reasonable man to talk to.” He said reproachfully. “Calm yourself. I’m not your enemy. On the contrary… I’m here to help you.”

“To help me?” Uryuu looked wary, then, “Ukitake-taichou… said that…?”

“Yes.” Kurotsuchi smiled genially. “You were his Vice Captain for a long time, after all — he seemed to be the best positioned to know all about you. He thinks very well of you — but sadly at the moment he’s unwell. So I’m here instead. Ukitake-taichou is my next door neighbour, after all — this seemed as good a place as any to keep your sword until I had the chance to return it to you personally.”

Uryuu let out a heavy sigh.

“I wish I remembered more clearly.” He murmured. “I was looking for Hassuiryou. I remember that. But there was a stranger at 6-Bantai. A young man — a man I didn’t know. He called himself Kuchiki… Byakuya? I was looking for Ginrei, but the stranger said he was dead.

And then… I don't know. I came here? To see you? Did Ukitake-taichou tell me to? I keep thinking there was a reason… a strong reason for me to come here. But I don't remember it. I don't remember anything. And… and I'm sorry… but I don't remember you either."

"But I did give you your sword, so you can believe that I'm your ally." Kurotsuchi said calmly. Slowly Uryuu nodded, running his finger down Hassuiryou's blade.

"This *is* my sword." He murmured. "The sword that was taken from me. Though I don't remember how or why, I know that it was. And in the Real World…"

At this he paled, casting Kurotsuchi an anxious glance.

"But you spoke of Niji." He whispered. "And when you say her name, I remember… I remember blood."

"Well, quite naturally you would do so." Kurotsuchi said evenly. "Ishida Niji was killed in the Real World, after all. Wasn't she? She was slain by your enemy, Shihouin Hirohito, and you slew him in revenge."

Uryuu's shoulders sank, and he glanced at his weapon regretfully.

"That's right." He murmured. "I killed Shihouin. Niji died in my arms, and then…"

"Afterwards you came back here." Kurotsuchi continued. "Where your sword was taken from you and sealed away. Correct?"

"I… suppose so." Uryuu ran his fingers through his hair. "But then… I thought I saw… Niji…"

"This is Soul Society." Kurotsuchi favoured him with a kind smile, resting his hand once more on the other's shoulder. "Niji died in the Real World, true enough. But you saw her, didn't you? In Karakura, where you fought that rogue Shinigami Kurosaki Ichigo to defend her honour. You saw her then, didn't you? And that's why you came here today. You came to get your sword… because Niji's soul is in danger. And she needs your help."

"Niji's *soul*…" Uryuu's eyes became huge as he digested his companion's lies. "Then she wasn't… her soul wasn't imprisoned after all?"

"Was Ishida Niji guilty of anything except being in the wrong place at the wrong time?" Kurotsuchi asked gently, and Uryuu shook his head.

“No, of course not.” He said fervently. “But even so…”

“Even so, Soul Society has justice and people who uphold that justice.” Kurotsuchi could only just keep the glee out of his tones. “But the noble clans, they stick together, Shizuki-san. You understand that, don’t you? That the Kuchiki-ke and the Shihouin-ke are old allies. And that, in order to cover up Shihouin’s crimes, Kuchiki Ginrei wrote a report. In that report, you were blamed. That’s why your sword was taken from you. And Niji… Niji is currently at 6-Bantai. She’s currently the prisoner of the Kuchiki-ke — as part of a noble conspiracy to prevent the truth coming out about what happened in the Real World that night.”

“Kuchiki… Ginrei?” Shock followed by betrayal flooded Uryuu’s expression, and his grip tightened on the sword hilt until his knuckles turned white. “And they’re keeping Niji, now? At that place? The place I was before, with the tattooed boy and the stranger who called himself ‘Byakuya’?”

“That’s right.” Kurotsuchi released his grasp on the boy’s *hakama*. “Won’t you go and rescue her, Shizuki-san? She’s waited for you for a long time, after all.”

Uryuu’s expression was unreadable for a moment, then resolution darkened his indigo gaze and slowly he nodded his head.

“For Niji I’d give everything. Even my life.” He murmured, and the sword glittered as though in answer to his emotion. “I won’t forgive them — any of them — for what they’ve tried to do.”

He bowed his head in Kurotsuchi’s direction.

“Thank you for your help so far, Kurotsuchi-san.” He said soberly. “But from now on you should not try and follow me. If I fall, I fall alone — that’s the way Kuchiki Ginrei always put it to me, whenever he tried to dissuade me from my relationship with Niji. Well, if I’m to fall, I’ll save her before I do. But I don’t want to involve anyone else in the crossfire.”

“I will stay here, then, and await your success.” Kurotsuchi said lightly, and Uryuu nodded. Then he disappeared, slipping into shunpo, and once he was gone, Kurotsuchi’s expression twitched into an amused smirk.

“Surprisingly easy, in the end, to convince him of my good natured intentions.” he murmured to himself. “Nemu!”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama?” Nemu appeared in the doorway of the chamber, and Kurotsuchi’s smile widened.

“Follow him, but don’t let yourself be observed.” He ordered. “I want to know every last moment of what happens… when that boy comes across a Captain of the calibre of Kuchiki Byakuya. After all, where honour is concerned, there is none so willing to ready his blade than the noble captain of 6-Bantai. Let us see, then, exactly how much strength a human Quincy’s soul can manifest when thrust into a battle with one of Seireitei’s most powerful squad leaders!”

“This is impossible.”

Ichigo flopped back against a broken section of wall, fanning himself absently as he cast Rukia a helpless look. “It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack. I know I’m not as good as Ishida is at sensing reiatsu, but shit, if there ain’t any reiatsu to sense…”

“I know what you mean.” Rukia pursed her lips. “We must’ve covered at least three squads’ territory since we left Nii-sama’s, and even now there’s no trace. Do you think… is Ishida right? Do you think someone did grab her, after all?”

“Maybe.” Ichigo looked grim. “The thing is, Ishida’s been spouting a lot of weird shit lately — that’s for sure. But even if I hate t’admit it, when it comes to reiatsu an’ that, he knows what he’s talkin’ about. An’ it seems odd to me that Inoue wouldn’t’ve come straight to us, either. It ain’t like her to stray off on her own. She must’ve known we’d worry. Maybe she did get nabbed. In which case…”

“Ishida thought it was 12-Bantai.” Rukia sighed. “But to be honest, short of storming the place… there’s not much we can do to find out. Nii-sama will go crazy, if he thinks we’re even contemplating that kind of thing… and it’d probably be enough to get you and Ishida both kicked out of Soul Society quicker than you came in. That’s why he locked Ishida up, after all — right? To prevent him from making a scene.”

“He was unusually emotional.” Ichigo rubbed his chin absently. “I mean, I’m used to his melodrama, but there was somethin’ else to it today, for sure. An’ when Renji hauled him off — d’you think Byakuya’s right? Is it a precaution for his own safety or jus’ that he doesn’t like being argued with?”

“I think Nii-sama meant what he said.” Rukia said frankly. “Which makes Inoue’s disappearance even more concerning. It’s as though…”

“Someone laid a trap, an’ used her to bait it?” Ichigo asked softly, and Rukia nodded.

“I was starting to wonder.” She agreed.

“Then we should go to 12 Bantai, shouldn’t we?” Ichigo’s hand was already more than half-way to Zangetsu’s hilt, but Rukia shook her head, grabbing him firmly by the arm.

“Stop it! I just said, didn’t I? We can’t just charge in and demand answers. Not even if you have a Shinigami substitute’s badge and free rein around Soul Society. I mean it, Ichigo. For a start, Kurotsuchi-taichou’s unpredictable and strange at the best of times. For another thing… it might be exactly what he wants. And for a final one… we haven’t got any proof that Inoue’s even been there.”

“You sound like Byakuya.” Ichigo muttered, and Rukia looked rueful.

“Perhaps, but only because this time he’s right.” She said honestly. “12-Bantai is full of Kurotsuchi’s minions, as well. Not just him, but his Vice Captain, and his lab staff… as well as a lot of squad Shinigami. Even you in a high pique couldn’t take them all on at once.”

“Want t’watch me try?” Ichigo asked frankly, and Rukia shook her head firmly.

“No.” She said. “We’re not going to do that. We’ll go back to 6-Bantai and we’ll get Nii-sama to do it instead.”

“Tsch.” Ichigo released his grip on Zangetsu, looking dissatisfied. “You really have been stopping with him too long.”

“I don’t think so.” Rukia shook her head. “You’ve never listened to me when I’ve tried to stop you doing something stupid. That’s all. Besides, Renji’ll be heading back there, too. We should at least report back on what we’ve found. Or rather, not found.”

“Yeah.” Ichigo muttered. “Some use that is. Still, at least Ishida didn’t miss out on anythin’. We didn’t find her, so he needn’t nurse his damn Quincy pride too hard over bein’ confined.”

“Mm.” As they turned back towards 6-Bantai, Rukia frowned, and Ichigo cast her a quizzical look.

“Rukia? Somethin’ up?”

“No, nothing.” Rukia shook her head. “Just… for a moment I thought I felt… something. But I guess I didn’t. Don’t worry about it. It’s probably just my senses being all which ways still. That’s all.”

“What kind of something was it?”

“I told you, it doesn’t matter.”

“Well, even if it doesn’t, what was it?”

Rukia frowned.

“It felt like *Ishida.*” She admitted. “But… it *wasn’t* Ishida. It was… I can’t explain it. Just for a moment I thought I sensed his reiatsu. And then the next moment it wasn’t there at all.”

“Ishida’s reiatsu’s different since he lost his *reiryoku.*” Ichigo reminded her, and Rukia nodded.

“I know.” She admitted. “And that’s maybe why I’m not totally sure. But even so…”

She paused, turning her head towards the direction of 12-Bantai.

“Imagination, perhaps.” She murmured, more than half to herself. “Just, for a split second… that’s what it felt like. And then… nothing.”

“From that direction?” Ichigo was alert immediately, and Rukia shrugged.

“I told you. I’m probably wrong.” She said matter-of-factly. “Ishida’s locked up at 6-Bantai. That’s totally the other direction from the way we’re going. I’m sorry, Ichigo. Forget about it. It’s nothing.”

“I wondered how long it’d take you to crawl back here.”

As they crossed into 6-Bantai’s territory, Renji bore down on them, a dark look in his eyes, and at his expression, Ichigo and Rukia stopped dead, exchanging confused glances.

“Crawl back…?” Rukia managed at length. “Renji, what do you mean? Why are you looking at us like that? What’s up?”

“Don’t give me that.” Renji advanced on her, anger in his brown eyes. “Like you’re all innocent in this. I know you didn’t like what Taichou ordered me to do, but even so, Rukia…”

“Huh?” Rukia’s eyes widened in confusion, and Ichigo frowned, pushing himself roughly between them.

“Renji, stop spewing crap and spit out whatever’s on your mind.” He said bluntly. “Cos whatever it is that’s bitin’ you, Rukia an’ me don’t know anything about it. Did you find Inoue?”

“I don’t know where the girl is.” Renji shook his head. “And, thanks to *someone,* I also don’t know where Ishida is right now, either.”

“*What?*” Ichigo stared, and Rukia’s dark eyes glittered with

indignation.

“What do you mean, thanks to someone?” She demanded. “Why are you looking at me like that, Renji! I’ve been with Ichigo! If you’ve gone and lost Ishida, it’s nothing to do with me!”

“But you locked him in, right?” Ichigo’s eyes narrowed. “Did you forget to fasten the catch or somethin’? Because Rukia’s been with me an’ neither of us have seen Ishida since you hauled him off to the cell a coupl’a hours ago. Whatever you think Rukia did, she couldn’t have done, so stop glarin’ an’ give us some explanation. Okay?”

Renji’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded, taking both Rukia and Ichigo by the arms and leading them forcibly into the 6-Bantai cell block. As they reached the end, Rukia let out a gasp, hurrying forward as she caught sight of the warped and twisted metal. She turned, staring at Renji in disbelief.

“But this is… Kidou!” She whispered, and Renji nodded his head.

“Yeah. It is.” He said blackly. “Melted the bars right away.”

Rukia looked cross.

“And you think I snuck back and let him out?” She demanded, dusting her hands off on her hakama as she met his gaze. “Don’t be stupid. If I was going to do that, Renji, I’d have used the key. I know where Nii-sama keeps them — besides, this was fired from *inside* the cell. Don’t you see? You’ve never been that good at Kidou, I know, but even so, you must be able to tell whether a shot came from inside or outside. If anyone fired it, it was Ishida himself. Noone else could’ve.”

“But…” Renji blanched, dropping down beside the warped bars and touching them gingerly with his fingers.

“This is *Haien*.” He murmured. “And a high level of it, too. I saw Ishida fire *byakurai* and *shakka-hou*, sure enough… but that he could do something like this…”

“Wait a minute. Back up.” Ichigo held up his hands. “Are we seriously saying that Ishida went crazy an’ blasted his way out of one of Byakuya’s cells because you didn’t want him to go searchin’ for Inoue?”

“That, or something more sinister.” Rukia sighed. “Nii-sama’s going to flip when he sees this.”

Renji rubbed his temples.

“I’m sorry, Rukia.” He said abruptly. “Just, with that level of Kidou,

I thought…”

“I should take it as a compliment, I guess.” Rukia said frankly. “But to be honest, Renji, as much as I have recovered from being here… I don’t think I’ve got enough *reiryoku* to fire that kind of Kidou blast yet. And even if I was better at Kidou than you were, there are plenty of other people far more skilled in it than me. Kira-fukutaichou and Hinamori-fukutaichou, for example.”

“An’ right now both of them are confined to 4-Bantai.” Renji said darkly.

“So now we’ve got Inoue and Ishida both missing in action?” Ichigo demanded. “Friggin’ brilliant. Rukia, you said you thought you felt Ishida’s reiatsu outside, didn’t you? Do you think you can trace it from that?”

“No.” Rukia looked helpless. “Like I said, it was only for a moment. And it felt strange. I can’t really explain it. But…”

She paused, her eyes widening.

“But… but I do sense something else.” She exclaimed, pushing past her two companions as she headed for the exit. “Can’t you feel it, Ichigo? That’s Inoue’s reiatsu. No doubt about it.”

“Inoue?” Ichigo looked startled, and Rukia nodded, shoving back the door.

Ichigo hurried to join her, realising as he did so that his friend was right. Though she was dishevilled and there was the sign of tears on her lashes and her cheeks, the missing schoolgirl was clearly in one piece, and relief flooded through him as they crossed the dusty courtyard to greet her.

“Where the hell have you been?” He demanded. “Inoue, we’ve been friggin’ worried sick about you! When Renji said you were in Soul Society, an’ then you didn’t come back here…”

“What happened, Inoue?” Rukia took her friend gently by the hands, eying her in concern. “You’ve been crying — what’s wrong?”

Orihime swallowed hard.

“I did something stupid and caused a bigger problem again.” She said miserably. “I thought… I thought I could help Ishida-kun, but in the end I think… I think I made things worse.”

“Ishida?” Renji joined them at this point. “You’ve seen him, have you? Because I want to have words with him about a cell door.”

“He’s at 12-Bantai.” As Rukia handed her a hankerchief, Orihime shakily wiped her eyes. “With Kuro… tsuchi-san. And… the sword.”

“Hassuiryou?” Renji’s eyes widened, and Orihime nodded her head. Ichigo cursed.

“So he was right.” He muttered. “This does have somethin’ to do with that jerk after all.”

He glanced at Orihime.

“Are you all right, Inoue? You look pretty shaken up.”

“Mm. I’m fine.” Orihime held up her hands. “Because Ishida-kun came and… and he made a deal with… with Kurotsuchi-san. So Kurotsuchi-san let me go. And Ishida-kun… stayed.”

“*What*?” Rukia paled, and Ichigo’s brows knitted together.

“So he used you to lure Ishida to him?” He asked quietly, and Orihime nodded.

“I’m sorry, Kurosaki-kun.” She said, looking about to start crying a second time. “I didn’t mean to make it worse.”

“It’s not your fault.” Rukia said gently. “Kurotsuchi-taichou seems to have an interest in Ishida… that’s all. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time — you’ve done nothing to be sorry about.”

“Rukia’s right.” Ichigo straightened, turning towards the gate. “We’ll sort it out from here, Inoue. Don’t look like that. We’ll get Ishida back an’ kick some sense into him about goin’ into do or die rescues on his own, without a shred of *reiryoku*.”

He grimaced.

“Where’s Byakuya in all of this?” He added, and Renji shrugged.

“He was heading up to the manor house to resolve some dispute or other over financing for a particular event or… I don’t know. Beats me how the nobility think or work.” He said helplessly.

“So then that means right now you’re in charge round here, right?” Ichigo glanced at him, and Renji nodded slowly.

“I guess… why?”

“Then take care of Inoue, will you? I’m going to go see Kurotsuchi about a Quincy, an’ I don’t want her getting in the middle of it.”

“Ichigo, what are you going to do?” Rukia looked anxious, and Ichigo shrugged.

“Whatever is necessary.” He said curtly. “To get that idiot back.”

“Abarai-fukutaichou?”

At that moment, there was a voice from the gate, and Renji turned, surprise glittering in his dark eyes as he registered the speaker.

“Kiyone!”

“Kiyone, what are you doing here?” Rukia looked startled too. “Is there… are you looking for me? Or…?”

“No… I’m looking for Kuchiki-taichou.” Kiyone shook her head, slipping her hand into the folds of her *hakama* and pulling out the sealed and folded letter. “Ukitake-taichou sent me here with this for him. I’m supposed to give it to him in person, but… if he isn’t here…”

She faltered, looking troubled, and Renji sighed, scratching his head.

“From Ukitake-taichou, huh?” He murmured. “Does this have somethin’ to do with Shizuki Ametatsu an’ a sword called Hassuiryou?”

“I don’t know what it’s about. He didn’t tell me.” Kiyone looked surprised. “Just that it was important and I should take it to 6-Bantai straight away. He wanted Kuchiki-taichou to read it as soon as possible.”

“Well, Kuchiki-taichou’s gone to play with his pawns at the manor house, so you can either wait for him to saunter back or you can leave it with me an’ I’ll get it to him.” Renji said frankly, looking tired. “If you try to take it to the Kuchiki-ke’s manor direct, you’ll probably get skewered by their overeager house guard, so…”

“You really do seem to have a negative opinion of my family, Renji.”

Before anyone could respond, Byakuya himself appeared in the centre of the courtyard, sending his Vice Captain a withering glance, and Renji bit his lip.

“Taichou, Kiyone’s brought you a message.” he said quickly. “And then… there’s something else you… you need to see.”

“A message?” Byakuya arched an eyebrow, turning his gaze on Kiyone quizzically. “From Ukitake, I presume?”

“Yes, sir.” Kiyone gathered her wits, holding out the folded document, and Byakuya took it, breaking the seal with a smooth flick of his nail and unfolding it. For a moment there was silence, as he

read the contents. Then he frowned, flexing his finger as white lightning glittered from it's tip. As the energy made contact with the paper, it smouldered and burned, and Ichigo let out an exclamation, staring at him in confusion as fragments of blackened ash dropped to the floor.

"Wasn't that s'posed t'be important?" He demanded, and Byakuya nodded.

"And not for the eyes of anyone else." He said disparagingly. "Particularly not ryoka."

"But if it has something to do with Ishida…"

"I already told you. It has nothing to do with you." Byakuya's tone indicated he was not willing to discuss the matter any further. "Renji, if you have finished berating yourself for your continued lack of tact or decorum, please go and fetch the Quincy boy from his cell. I wish to speak with him directly."

"So do all of us, Taichou, but he ain't there." Renji recovered himself, shaking his head. Byakuya's eyes widened.

"Not there?" He echoed. "What do you mean?"

"What he said, obviously." Ichigo was irritated by now. "He's disappeared."

"But he was correctly fastened inside the cell, was he not?"

"Yeah. The door's still locked — far as I can make out from the mess." Renji said with a sigh. "He melted it clean away, Taichou. Usin' Kidou. High level, too. Whatever's buzzin' through him, it seems to have got to buzzin' a bit more. And another thing… we found Inoue. Or at least, she found us."

"Inoue?" Byakuya turned, as if seeing Orihime for the first time.

"Nii-sama, Kurotsuchi-taichou had her prisoner, just as Ishida said." Rukia said softly. "And now he has Ishida… and the sword."

"The sword?" A brief flicker of alarm crossed Byakuya's normally composed grey eyes, and he frowned. "You are sure about this, girl?"

"I saw it." Orihime nodded. "Hass… Hassuiryou. The sword you and Ukitake-san were talking about before he collapsed."

Byakuya closed his eyes briefly.

"Kurotsuchi…" He muttered, then he sighed.

"Very well." He said frankly, opening his eyes. "Then we will

proceed through the regular channels. I can see the look on your face, Kurosaki Ichigo. I can see you want to charge in there and bring 12-Bantai to its knees, but I will not permit it. There are ways and means to deal with this kind of action, after all. And considering the levels to which your Bankai is capable of taking you — I will not let you unleash it on Seireitei a second time."

"Ishida's my business more than he is yours." Ichigo objected, but Byakuya shook his head.

"On the contrary." He said coldly. "This is Soul Society. This is 6-Bantai. I am Captain here. This is not your world, and we will abide by Seireitei's rules, if you don't mind."

Before Ichigo could respond, there was a tremendous explosion from outside the 6-Bantai gates, and as one person the group all turned at the sound, Ichigo's eyes widening with disbelief and alarm as he took in the figure now standing beneath the smoking, smouldering archway.

"Ishida." He murmured, his fingers automatically moving towards the hilt of Zangetsu, but Renji grabbed his arm, pulling him back.

"That ain't Ishida." He muttered. "Can't you tell from the reiatsu? It's the same as it was the day he went mental on me here in the barracks. Only twice as messed up. Whatever's inside of him, that ain't Ishida callin' the shots."

Ichigo bit his lip, taking in his friend anew. Renji was right, he realised apprehensively. Though the boy who stood before them looked like their Quincy companion, there was a blue, angry glow of glittering reiatsu surrounding his body that prickled and danced with a foreboding strength. Behind his glasses, the Quincy's eyes were clouded and resolute, indicating that in this current state of mind there would be no reasoning with him. In his left hand he clutched a weapon, but it was not a sword that Ichigo had ever seen before, and as it glittered and glimmered with light, it almost appeared that it's surface was coated with the slick sheen of pooling water.

For a moment, noone moved. Then, Orihime darted forward, holding up her hands.

"Ishida-kun! Please! Don't do anything you might regret!" She exclaimed. "You don't want to hurt anyone! I know you don't!"

Uryuu turned his head, surprise glittering in his gaze at the sight of her.

"Niji." He murmured. "So he was right, after all. You *are* here. Just

as the 12-Bantai Captain said."

"Niji?" Renji blinked, and Ichigo cursed.

"For the last goddamn time, Ishida, she's not Niji!" He exclaimed. "She's Inoue Orihime and you're acting under some freakin' delusion, so snap out of it, dammit!"

Uryuu's eyes narrowed as he caught sight of Ichigo, his grasp tightening on his weapon.

"And you are the rogue… Kurosaki Ichigo." He murmured. "I remember you. In the Real World, you were there too. Trying to keep Niji away from me."

"Damn right I was trying to keep her away from you! You're freakin' insane when you're like this!" Ichigo shot back.

"Ichigo, stop it. You're only going to make him angry." Rukia warned, and Ichigo snorted.

"Looks to me like he already is plenty angry." He said darkly. "An' if he's spoilin' for a fight, then that's fine by me."

"*No*!" Orihime looked horrified. "Please, Kurosaki-kun, don't attack him! Please… he's not himself! That's still Ishida-kun, somewhere inside there — if you hurt him, you'll be hurting Ishida-kun too!"

"Inoue." Despite himself, Ichigo relaxed his grip on Zangetsu's hilt at her heartfelt plea, and at the sight of it, Uryuu let out a low chuckle.

"So, you lack conviction after all, do you?" He taunted. "Or are you afraid to fight a Captain of the Gotei 13?"

"It wouldn't be the first time." Ichigo snapped. "Dammit, Ishida, snap out of it, will you? Inoue's right. I don't want t'cut you to ribbons… so see sense already, will you?"

"I came for Niji." Uryuu stood his ground. "To rescue her soul from 6-Bantai's quarters."

"To rescue her… *soul*?" Rukia frowned.

Uryuu's gaze slid across to her.

"That's right." He said softly. "To put right things that went wrong a long time ago. I couldn't save her then. But this time will be different. Whatever I have to do, I'll do. Even raze 6-Bantai to the ground, if need be. I'm not leaving here without her. So it's up to you."

He held out his hand to Orihime, who hesitated for a moment, then took a slow step towards him.

“Inoue, no!” Rukia exclaimed, grabbing her friend by the arm and pulling her back behind her. “He’s not sane like this — you don’t know what he might do!”

“But if it’s me he wants, then noone else will get hurt!” Orihime protested, struggling against Rukia’s grip in vain. “Please, Kuchiki-san! Let me go! *Let me go*!”

“Kuchiki?” Uryuu’s eyes widened at the sound of the name, then anger flooded his gaze, and he raised his right hand, red light glittering across his palm.

“So you’re a part of this too, are you, girl?” He demanded. “You’re another of those noble traitors who’ve done their best to keep us apart? Well, not any more! I won’t tolerate it any more! I won’t let anyone keep Niji and I apart any longer.”

His eyes became slits.

“*Shakka-hou*.” He murmured, and a vibrant flare of red flame shot out across the yard, catching Rukia square in the chest and sending her sprawling across the yard, struck unconscious by the force of the blow.

“*Kuchiki-san!*” Orihime screamed, and Renji’s eyes glittered with anger, Zabimaru out of its sheath in an instant as he moved to block Uryuu’s pathway for a second attempt.

“Ishida or not, you’ll pay for that one!” He said darkly, and Uryuu smirked, shaking his head.

“You again.” He murmured. “Vice Captain of the Sixth Squad. Do you think you have a hope in hell of beating me, now, when I have Hassuiryou returned to me?”

“I’ll rip holes through the whole of you before you have time to blink.” Renji threatened, and Ichigo, jerked to attention by his companion’s ire, loosened Zangetsu from its resting place.

“Renji’s right.” He said frankly. “You can’t go round hurting people. If you’re not going to see sense by talking, we’ll knock it into you.”

“Enough.” Before the conflict could continue any further, Byakuya had stepped between them, holding up his hands. “Renji. Sheath your sword. You too, ryoka boy. I will not tolerate you fighting on my territory.”

“But Taichou!” Renji objected, and Byakuya’s eyes narrowed as his gaze flitted to Rukia’s still form.

“Kiyone, take Inoue Orihime to 13-Bantai.” He said softly. “Do not stop for anyone. Tell Ukitake that I have read his letter and I understand what must be done. Go now, and quickly. You can get out via the back entrance. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Kiyone nodded her head, grabbing Orihime by the arm and pulling her in the indicated direction before the redhead could complain.

“Niji!” As he saw the girl disappearing, Uryuu’s expression became one of anger and distress, but Byakuya paid him no attention.

“Renji, take care of Rukia.” He said softly. “And ensure that the Kurosaki boy does not attempt to interfere.”

“Inter… fere?” Renji looked startled, and Byakuya’s eyes became cold as his right hand closed purposefully around the hilt of his sword.

“This is my squad.” He murmured. “And if anyone will avenge the insult to my family and my position, it shall be me. Do not interfere, Renji. You either, ryoka boy. If you do, I will cut you down with Senbonzakura too.”

He pulled the shining weapon from its sheath, holding it up before his face.

“Well, Shizuki Ametatsu?” He said softly, his voice dripping with ice as he turned to meet Uryuu’s gaze. “Shall we see, then, what kind of a Shinigami you really are?”

Chapter Twenty Three: Cherry Rain

Chapter Twenty Three: Cherry Rain

Well, to call it deja-vu would be an understatement.

Kyouraku leant up against the wall of his friend's chamber with a sigh, casting the sleeping Shinigami a resigned, rueful glance as he did so. It was stupid, he reflected, that after all this time Ukitake's attacks could still prompt such anxiety inside of him — but he knew only too well that Soul Society without his fellow Captain would be a much more monotonous place. He could not even imagine it, if he was honest — they had been working together for so long that it had almost become a pattern and one that he had no desire to change.

This had been a bad attack, but not the worst attack Ukitake had ever had.

Kyouraku frowned, remembering the last time. It had been after the incident that had seen a Hollow invade 13-Bantai, killing many officers including the squad's long term Vice Captain. Ukitake had been uncommonly fond of Shiba Kaien, he had always known that, and in return Kaien had been a loyal, diligent Vice Captain who had easily taken care of the squad whenever Ukitake's own health failed him. His death had been a tremendous blow to everyone, but Kyouraku knew better than most how Ukitake had truly felt about it, and his frown deepened as he remembered the conversation they had had not long after Kaien's body had been returned to his family.

"My weakness caused this." Ukitake had said, his words heavy and his voice edged with a pain Kyouraku hadn't heard there for a long time. "The decimation of my squad, the deaths of some of my best officers… the loss of Kaien as my Vice Captain. All of these things are my fault, Kyouraku. But do you know what the worst of it is? That that girl, who Byakuya entrusted to my care for her own safety, now has to live with the burden of it for the rest of her life. That forevermore, whenever she remembers her Vice Captain, she will have to know that it was her blade on which he died. Because of my weakness, Kuchiki Rukia has been scarred for good."

Before his squad, Ukitake had maintained his strong front. But it had taken its toll, and, three days after Kaien's death, he had collapsed in the middle of a Captain's meeting, sparking an attack that had resulted in him being taken to and cared for by 4-Bantai.

At the time, Kyouraku remembered, Unohana Retsu had given Ukitake a gentle, yet stiff lecture on pushing his body too far when he was already showing signs of an impending attack. But Kyouraku knew that part of the reason Ukitake still lived despite his frailness was because of that determination not to give up — a sense that could not be quantified, yet with which the 13-Bantai Captain had defined his whole life.

But then, he reflected to himself with a sigh, Ukitake was not in the habit of often complaining in public about his health. Even recently, with all the tell-tale symptoms beginning to raise their heads, he had made little attempt to take life easily. He had attended meetings, and even spoken up on several debated matters. He had been active and around as much as ever he was, and Kyouraku knew from long and painful experience that his friend was stubborn about not accepting help if he did not think he needed it.

“This is something that’s been my companion a long time, and will be until I die.” He had once said, when Kyouraku had asked him about it. “If I give in to it, it will control my life. I’m not this disease. I’m Ukitake Juushirou. And I’ve got too many things to focus on to worry about minor health grumbles.”

Minor health grumbles.

Despite himself, Kyouraku smirked.

Only Ukitake could refer to the serious tubercular spasms as ‘minor health grumbles’. Yet even so, Kyouraku had often admired his friend for his steadfast determination and dedication to duty in the face of adversity.

This was not one of those times.

“Kyouraku?”

At that moment a faint voice from the bed drew him back to his companion and he cast the other Captain a quizzical glance as Ukitake slowly and gingerly hauled himself up into a sitting position.

“How long have you been there?”

“A little while.” Kyouraku’s lips twitched into a smile at his friend’s surprise. “Ah, don’t look like that. Your quarters are as good a place to hide from Nanao and the work she wants me to do as anything else.”

Ukitake met his gaze, and Kyouraku knew that the other man was not fooled by the 8-Bantai Captain’s pretence of nonchalance. He did not refute it, however, merely returning the smile with a rueful one of

his own.

“Poor Nanao.” He murmured. “You do give her a hard time, sometimes.”

“Well, she likes to work, what can I say? She leaves very little for a Captain to do, and I don’t like to upset her when she’s happy being busy.” Kyouraku folded his arms lazily across his chest. “Besides, someone has to come and make sure you don’t do anything stupid. Dai-senpai told me, you know, what you’d done. Going to the real world, manipulating a Senkai Gate… bringing back a ryoka girl… is there a reason for this sudden activity or is Seireitei’s social scene suddenly boring you enough to drive you to extremes?”

Ukitake looked sheepish, shaking his head.

“No…” He said slowly, his voice still muted and tentative and Kyouraku knew that his friend’s chest was still weak even though some colour had returned to the man’s face. “I’m sorry if I worried you. There were things I had to see to, and I was the only one, really, who could. So I took a gamble. I don’t think it was the wrong gamble — but I suppose my body lately hasn’t been up to that kind of activity.”

“There’s an understatement if ever there was one.” Kyouraku eyed him keenly. “Well? Are you going to enlighten me or is this something you’re going to hide in your *haori* and keep to yourself?”

Ukitake’s eyes clouded, and he nodded his head, pulling his blankets more tightly around his body.

“Do you remember Shizuki Ametatsu?” He asked softly, and Kyouraku’s eyes became huge with surprise.

“Ametatsu-kun?” He demanded. “Could hardly forget him. But he’s been dead for… two centuries now? Juu-kun, I know you’ve a reputation for loyalty to your subordinates but that’s going over the top some, even for you!”

Ukitake pursed his lips.

“You haven’t called me that since we were schoolboys.” He scolded, a little more of his usual self slipping into his tones, and Kyouraku found himself glad to hear it. He shrugged, unrepentant.

“If you’ll behave like a reckless schoolboy, that’s what you get.” He said evenly. “But that’s off the point. Why Ametatsu-kun all of a sudden? I don’t understand.”

“It’s complicated.” Ukitake rubbed his temples. “And a large part of

it is probably my fault."

"Woah there, we're not having this conversation again." Kyouraku held up his hands. "I told you then and I'll tell you now that nothing that silly boy did was any way your fault. He acted on his impulses and he paid the price for it. He knew that as well as anyone, which is why he didn't get you involved when he could easily have flown to you for sanctuary. Besides, I also remember how much you fought against the Shihouin clan to get justice for his soul… there was nothing that could have been done for him then that you didn't do, so stop looking at it that way."

His eyes became sober.

"I remember how much it took out of you, all of that, then." He said softly. "And I'm looking at you now, on the verge of falling into a similar state. Just like when Kaien died, too. Your compassion is going to be the death of you, one of these days. And I don't want to see it, Juu-kun. There are a lot of people who'd be sad if you got stupid and killed yourself trying to help someone out, so stop and feel guilty about that for a change, will you?"

"It's not about Shizuki being dead." Ukitake shook his head. "It's more complicated, I told you."

Slowly he recounted all the details of Uryuu's situation and his own activities, and as he did so, Kyouraku's expression became grave.

He pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Ametatsu-kun's soul, huh…" He murmured softly, and Ukitake nodded.

"You can't say you don't see why I had to get involved. You know better than anyone, in fact… you're not going to tell me I was wrong?"

"No, I don't think I was going to say that." Kyouraku folded his arms casually across his chest. "Besides, you wouldn't listen even if I did say so. I just think you beat yourself up over things, that's all. Ametatsu-kun was a silly boy, we both know that. And I remember as clearly as you do how the Shihouin closed ranks and insisted that their man had been cut down in cold blood. Even though the arrogant idiot had slaughtered innocent people… I remember the farce that followed. You did everything you could then, Ukitake. You don't need to fight it again now. It's not good for you. When it comes to the death of any of your subordinates… it's not good for you. Sometimes you have to let it go. Ametatsu-kun is dead. He made that choice himself."

“I know he did.” Ukitake said gravely. “But Kyouraku… that boy has spoken to Hassuiryou already. There’s no doubt in my mind that Ishida Uryuu has Shizuki’s soul and that Kurotsuchi is somehow manipulating his actions when Shizuki’s spirit has control. If he had the sword as well… I don’t know precisely what Kurotsuchi is planning. But I worry about it. Ishida Uryuu came to Soul Society for us to help him. Not for us to make things worse.”

“And because you couldn’t save Ametatsu-kun, you’re going to save him instead?”

Kyouraku reflected, and Ukitake smiled ruefully.

“Something like that.”

“Well, I suppose there’s no helping it, then.” Kyouraku shrugged his shoulders. “I just wish you’d appoint someone else to play Captain Hero for you from time to time. That’s all.”

“I just like to take responsibility for things that are of my making, that’s all.” Ukitake said heavily.

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

“I feel better than I did.” He owned. “But I’m tired and my chest aches. It’s so frustrating, you know… I ought to be able to see this through myself. But at least Byakuya should now know everything that I know. And that’s enough for the time being.”

“Well, at least if you see that, I can stop nagging you.” Kyouraku’s eyes flickered with relief. “Which I really don’t like doing, you know… just sometimes you give me no choice.”

“I’m sorry, Shunsui.” Ukitake raised apologetic brown eyes to his friend’s gaze. “I didn’t mean to worry people.”

“Well, think a bit more next time.” Kyouraku scolded lightly. “At least this time it’s not a major attack, and Dai-senpai’s remedy seems to have helped you. When she told me you’d been coughing blood again and that you’d pretty much collapsed I was afraid it was going to be a big one… but you don’t seem so bad as I feared. So I suppose, on those grounds, I’ll have to forgive you.”

He grinned indolently.

“If nothing else, visiting a sick colleague is one of those excuses Nanao can’t refute.” He murmured. “And 8-Bantai’s administration documents need my signature… they’re due around this time.”

“You never change, you know that?”

“Nor do you.” Kyouraku retorted neatly. “We’ve been friends far too long to hide our flaws from each other now, don’t you think?”

Before Ukitake could respond, there was a frantic pounding at the door, and the Captain frowned, casting his friend a confused look.

“That’s Kiyone’s reiatsu.” Kyouraku murmured. “Kiyone, and…”

“Inoue-san.” Ukitake’s brow creased in consternation. “Would you call them in, Kyouraku? I can’t raise my voice over that racket without hurting my chest further, and I don’t really want to face Unohana-taichou if I do that.”

“With pleasure.” Kyouraku’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “Kiyone-cha-an! Come on in… your Captain will see you now!”

Almost at once the door slid back with a bang and a breathless Kiyone, followed by the tousle-headed human girl tumbled into the Captain’s chamber, Kiyone scrambling into a kneeling position by Ukitake’s bed as she met Ukitake’s gaze fearfully.

“Taichou!”

“Kiyone… what’s happened?” Ukitake asked softly, anxiety once more stirring in his dark eyes.

“Taichou… I’m sorry… to disturb you.” Kiyone scrambled onto her knees, bowing her head towards first Ukitake then Kyouraku. “But… 6-Bantai… the Quincy boy… is…”

“Ishida-kun?” Ukitake’s already pale features blanched, and Kyouraku frowned, grasping Kiyone loosely by the shoulders and giving her a slight shake.

“Calm down and tell us properly.” He said gently. “What’s happening at 6-Bantai? Ukitake sent you to deliver a letter, didn’t he… did Byakuya send you back with a pretty girl as thanks?”

“Kuchiki-san said I should come with Kiyone-san.” Orihime shook her head, tears glittering in her grey eyes. “But… I wanted to speak to Ishida-kun. Only he didn’t seem like Ishida-kun, and Kuchiki-san said I shouldn’t go near him. And then…”

“He had the sword, Taichou.” Kiyone said anxiously. “The sword you said he shouldn’t have… he had it. Kuchiki-taichou told me to bring Inoue-san here. He read your letter, and said that he understood what had to be done about it… and that we were to go and not look back till we got here.”

Ukitake’s eyes became grave.

“Hassuiryou.” He murmured. “Then I was too late, after all? Damn this chest of mine!”

“He wasn’t Ishida-kun.” Orihime added at that moment, and Kyouraku could tell that the girl was on the verge of losing her composure completely. “He spoke strangely and he was angry. Very angry. He… his reiatsu wasn’t like Ishida-kun’s. It was… sort of like it was in Karakura that day when he was strange before, only… only this time it was spiky. Spiky and angry, as though he wanted to do something he really shouldn’t do.”

“I can feel it.” Ukitake bit his lip. “Shizuki’s reiatsu… can’t you, Kyouraku? It’s like it was that day. Like he’s lost all hope and he’s charging into a situation he can’t possibly control.”

He pushed back his blankets, beginning to get to his feet, but Kyouraku shook his head.

“Woah, there. You’re not going anywhere.” He said firmly, gripping his companion by the shoulders and forcing him back down. “You’re resting, remember?”

He cast Kiyone a smile.

“It’s all right, Kiyone-chan. You can go back to your squad duties. I’ll take care of your Captain and Orihime-chan.”

“Yes, Kyouraku-taichou.” There was still anxiety in the girl’s eyes, but she nodded, saluting and then disappearing from the chamber, leaving Orihime alone with the two Captains.

“Kyouraku, you’re being high-handed.” Ukitake objected once she was gone, and Kyouraku shook his head.

“By order of Dai-senpai, you’re staying put.” He said inexorably. “You want to argue with her about it? We both know you’re not up to doing anything, and it won’t help a soul if you struggle up and collapse for real this time. You’ve given it over to Byakuya. Let him deal with it now.”

“But…” Ukitake faltered, and Kyouraku sighed heavily.

“Why do we always have the same conversation about things like this?” He asked resignedly. “Don’t give me that look, Juu-kun. I already told you, you’re not up to it. And I’m not facing Dai-senpai if you do something stupid and wind up dropping down somewhere and needing emergency help. That won’t do the Quincy boy any good either, you know.”

“But Byakuya…” Ukitake swallowed, then, “Kyouraku, I warned

him that if Ishida-kun got Hassuiryou, it could be dangerous. I think… I think Byakuya is going to fight him. And that means… that someone is going to get hurt."

"Ukitake…"

"Kyouraku, I won't sit by and let my weak body be the reason someone else gets sacrificed!" Ukitake shook his head, struggling against his friend's grip, though he was too feeble to loosen the man's grasp, and Kyouraku pursed his lips.

"I won't either." He said frankly. "Why don't you see it, you old fool? If you go out there, the one who'll be hurt is *you*. Your fever must be higher than I thought, babbling nonsense like that! Byakuya's a big boy now, and he's capable of taking care of matters properly. You handed it to him to deal with, didn't you? Then let him do so. You're no match for anyone's sword at the moment, whether it be Senbonzakura or Hassuiryou. And I won't let you risk it. No matter what."

"Byakuya-san… is going to *kill* Ishida-kun?" Orihime's eyes became frightened, and Kyouraku sent her an apologetic look.

"You might not want to hear this conversation, Orihime-chan." He said sadly. "But in the end we have to leave it to the bocchan to handle. There's nothing Ukitake can do, and he knows it as well as I do. His body's in no state for anything, let alone diving into combat situations."

Ukitake looked obstinate, and Kyouraku shook his head.

"I know that look too." He warned. "It has no effect on me. I've told you. I won't let you kill yourself trying to right a wrong that probably wasn't even your fault in the first place."

Ukitake's eyes closed briefly, and Kyouraku could tell his friend was in pain despite his struggles — even raising his voice briefly in indignation had been enough to spark his symptoms, and he was only just holding back a further attack.

"I can feel their reiatsu, sparking and clashing in the air around 6-Bantai." He murmured, his voice barely above a hoarse whisper as he fought to make himself understood. "Hassuiryou's spirit is calling out to Sougyo no Kotowari, just like it used to, whenever Shizuki and I trained. This is my mess, Kyouraku. If I do nothing now, it will mean that another young life has been lost because of my feeble body. Shizuki's death, Kaien's death… I promised myself I wouldn't let Ishida-kun be a third."

“But in this state, there is nothing you can do except kill yourself.” Kyouraku said wisely. “And we both know it’s true. You’re in no fit state to fight anyone, and we both know it. Besides, if your suspicions are correct — and they probably are — the boy won’t listen to reason anyway. If he’s really being manipulated in the way you think he is…”

“If Byakuya fights him, there won’t be much of him left.” Ukitake was agitated now. “Even given that Shizuki was a strong Captain, and even though Ishida-kun has his sword… it’s not an even battle. If it was Shizuki himself, maybe he’d have a chance. Perhaps, if he was desperate or lucky, he’d win. But he only killed Shihouin Hirohito that night because he wasn’t afraid of dying himself. And if Byakuya… Byakuya will kill him rather than let him run rampant on the streets of Seireitei. I know how he thinks. Kyouraku, let me go.”

He coughed, struggling to draw breath into his lungs, and Kyouraku sighed.

“And let you choke up more blood? I don’t think so.” He said frankly. “Your lungs are already rubbed raw from the last attack. You’d collapse before you even got there. Be sensible for once, will you? You don’t have a choice in this one. You wrote to Byakuya and you’ll have to trust that he took what you said to heart. In the meantime…”

“I’m the only one who might be able to talk both Shizuki and Byakuya down — what do you expect me to do?”

“But… Byakuya-san… doesn’t he want to *help* Ishida-kun? If Ukitake-san doesn’t go, Ishida-kun’s soul will really… be destroyed for good?” Orihime looked pale, and Kyouraku sighed.

“Ukitake’s in no state to do anything except sit tight and let himself recover. He already pushed himself too far.” He said sadly. “If he tries to move too much now, all that’ll happen is he’ll choke and collapse again and he’ll get a scolding from Unohana-taichou of 4-Bantai for disobeying her orders. He won’t be able to intervene in a fight involving two Captain level *zanpakutou*. In this state, there’s just no way.”

Ukitake buried his head in his hands.

“I can feel Senbonzakura’s reiatsu now, too.” He whispered. “Byakuya really *is* going to fight. Kyouraku…”

“There’s *nothing you can do*.” Kyouraku repeated, shaking his head. “You know it yourself, don’t you? You’re still far too unsteady to even leave the barracks.”

Orihime glanced at her hands, then,

“I… I could try and use my shield.” She murmured hesitantly. “Even though Byakuya-san said he thought it wouldn’t work, and Renji-kun didn’t think it would be strong enough… I could try. I don’t know if I can heal sick people, because there are a lot of things I don’t understand about my power yet. But I know it can heal injured people. And… and if Ukitake-san’s chest is injured because of his coughing, well… maybe I could heal that. Maybe then…”

She trailed off, and Kyouraku shot her a startled look.

“Orihime-chan? That’s a tall ask, you know. Even considering that you want to help your friend, Ukitake’s lungs have taken years of abuse.”

“But I could try.” Orihime stuck to her guns. “Even if it is useless. Ishida-kun came to rescue me from Kurotsuchi-san’s squad offices, after all. And I didn’t come here to cause more trouble, even though that’s what’s happened. I came here because I wanted to help Ishida-kun. And if I help Ukitake-san, then Ukitake-san might be able to help Ishida-kun… please, let me try at the very least. Even if it doesn’t work… I don’t think it will make anything worse.”

“Ukitake?” Kyouraku cast his old friend a questioning glance, and slowly Ukitake nodded his head, a faint flicker of hope stirring in the weary brown eyes at her suggestion.

“I don’t want to exhaust your strength, Inoue-san.” He said quietly. “But if you think you can make any difference at all… we don’t have much time, after all.”

“Then I’ll do what I can.” Orihime put her hands to her hair-slides, shooting the Captain a faint smile. “Please, Ukitake-san, lie back on your pillows. It won’t hurt, and I’ll do my best to be quick.”

She closed her eyes, even as the 13-Bantai Captain did as he was bidden, and Kyouraku watched in fascination as the tiny petals of her slides began to scatter into beams of light. Though he had heard of the girl’s power, it was the first time he had seen it up close, and he marvelled at how a human child could so easily command so much spiritual power in such an unassuming, unlikely body.

“Ayame. Shun’ou.” Orihime murmured, and Kyouraku saw the spray of light reforming into two distinctive, if tiny figures.

The girl hesitated for a moment, then spread her hand out towards Ukitake’s weary frame.

“Can you help him?” She asked softly, and the tiny creatures — imps or fairies, Kyouraku was not sure quite which — buzzed around her head as they surveyed the problem.

“We can try.” One of them said at length. “If you believe in doing it, Orihime-san, we can probably make a difference. Just focus on what you know. We’ll do the rest.”

“I’m counting on you.” Orihime nodded, spreading her fingers as a glow of golden light began to surround Ukitake’s frail body, and carefully Kyouraku shuffled back out of the way of the human’s spell.

“*Souten-kisshun.*” She whispered. “*Watashi wa kyozetsu suru*!”

“That’s some trick, Orihime-chan.” Kyouraku murmured. “Though considering your choice of friends, I suppose I shouldn’t be all that surprised by it.”

“I’m better at healing people than I am at fighting them.” Orihime admitted, holding out her hands to further guide the *Rikka*’s magic. “I don’t know how much I can do here, but at least… I think I can do something.”

“Well, fighting isn’t very ladylike, I suppose.” Kyouraku rubbed his chin pensively. “Still, I wouldn’t knock it. This is plenty good enough. I know Ukitake well enough to know that no matter what I say, he won’t relax until he’s poked his nose into the situation. He might as well at least go with a good chance of surviving it. It’s a good thing, in the end, Kiyone brought you here.”

He smiled, amusement touching his expression.

“Maybe the bocchan’s smarter than we thought, and intended that all along.”

“I think he just wanted me out of the way.” Orihime said slowly. “Because I’m bad at fighting and because it was dangerous. Ishida-kun thought I was Niji again — and he hurt Kuchiki-san because she wanted to protect me. I guess he thought, if Kiyone-san brought me back here, I’d be out of the cross-fire. And he probably didn’t think there was anything I’d be able to do to help, since I’m not a Shinigami and I’m not so very strong.”

“He underestimates you, in that case.” Kyouraku put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You kids never fail to amaze me with the things you can do.”

“They have a very special quality all of their own.” Ukitake agreed. “Particularly when it comes to helping each other.”

He turned his head slightly, casting Orihime a smile, and Kyouraku was glad to see the spark of life returning to his friend's dark gaze.

"Thank you, Inoue-san." He murmured. "From hereon in I'm in your hands."

For the brief moment after Byakuya had drawn his sword, dead silence fell over 6-Bantai. Even the wind appeared to have dropped to nothing more than the slightest of breezes as, in the rubble-cluttered courtyard of one of Seireitei's thirteen noble squads, the Shinigami Captain and the would be rebel faced one another, gazes meeting across the faint haze of dust that still lingered from the original Kidou explosions.

Byakuya tightened his grip on his weapon, his gaze cold and challenging as he narrowed his eyes.

"Well?" He asked softly, his words cold as ice and twice as impassive. "I thought you said you had business with me, Shizuki Ametatsu."

At the sound of the former Captain's name once more, Uryuu flinched, then his brows drew together, anger sparking in the deep indigo eyes as he nodded his head.

"So you do know." He murmured. "Who I am. And you understand, then, why I'm here."

"I understand that you've invaded the body and soul of an innocent human and that that act itself is unforgivable." Byakuya said icily. "For that crime alone I should strike you down with Senbonzakura where you stand. You are a criminal — a traitor to Soul Society who does not deserve to stand there and meet my gaze. I will not tolerate any further impudence from you, or aggression towards my squad. Set down your sword, else I will have to remove it from your dead fingers after Senbonzakura severs your arm from your body."

"Byakuya, hang on a minute!" Ichigo let out an exclamation, taking a step or two away from the edge of the squad grounds as he did so. "Noone said anything about slicing anyone — we're only gonna take him down so he can't fight us, right? Noone's going to slash bits of him off… or anything else like that. Right? Even if you are pissed about him attacking Rukia — Inoue was right. That is still Ishida in there!"

"That is not Ishida Uryuu." Byakuya flicked Senbonzakura's tip disparagingly in the direction of his tense, bristling enemy. "Which if

you would improve your ability in sensing reiatsu, you would know only too well. And in order to prevent him from becoming a bother and a danger to Seireitei, I will do what I need to do to stop him. Even if that means separating him from his life."

"Dammit, Byakuya…!"

"Ichigo, stop it." That was Renji, and out of the corner of his eye Byakuya was aware of his Vice Captain grabbing the human's sleeve, pulling him back. "The Taichou's right. That ain't Ishida's reiatsu. It ain't even a little bit like Ishida's. Before, when he attacked me… there was still somethin' of the Quincy in him, even if it wasn't the same. This time… it's different. That sword… whatever the hell it is, it's made things worse. He's not Ishida any more."

"Then we have to beat the ghost out of him, don't we?" Ichigo objected, and Byakuya slowly shook his head.

"You are slow to understand, ryoka boy." He said softly. "Ishida Uryuu is no longer here. He no longer exists. It is not a matter of 'beating a ghost' out of him. His soul is the same as Shizuki Ametatsu's soul. They are the same person, just lifetimes apart. There is no way to separate what has already become merged into one. Unless the criminal relinquishes his control of the body himself — there is no way to retrieve your friend. And I do not know…"

His eyes narrowed, as he turned his gaze back on the Quincy.

"I do not know if even that is possible, given the state of his reiatsu." He murmured.

"Well? Have you finished analysing me, Kuchiki-bocchan?" Uryuu spoke up at that moment, tapping his sword against his palm as he eyed Byakuya contemptuously. "You drew your blade, but is that all you intend to do? Because I'm not the kind of Shinigami who fights someone who's not looking me square in the face… but I'm not going to stand here and wait for you all day. Are you capable of fighting with that thing, or just waving it around so that it catches the light? Because if that's the case, it'll be you who'll find his limbs severed. It won't be me."

He drew his right hand slowly across the shimmering blade, his eyes near slits as he gazed at Byakuya resolutely.

"*Ryuu no Baratsuki.*" He murmured, and behind him Byakuya heard Renji let out an involuntary gasp as the Quincy's blade split into a haze of tiny fragments, each one hovering cloud-like in front of him as if waiting for further commands.

“I see that you have no intention, then, of discussing anything in an adult manner.” Byakuya pursed his lips. “Perhaps, after all, it is better that it is my blade that does this.”

“An adult manner?” Uryuu snorted. “Is that what the nobility think they do? Don’t make me laugh. I’ve fought your kind before, Kuchiki-bocchan. I’ve fought and killed noble blood before… I know all too well that they talk a lot but they don’t have the talent they boast of.”

He flung his hand out towards his companion, who gazed at him coldly.

Chire, Senbonzakura. “He said flatly, as the elegant weapon shimmered and divided into a flurry of pink-tinged petals, spinning out across the yard to counter Hassuiryou’s glittering spikes.

“Well, that’s a first for me.” Uryuu raised his hand, summoning the shards back into a whole blade as he gazed at Byakuya keenly. “I’ve never encountered a *zanpakutou* that splits in the same way as mine before this. It’s a pity I won’t get to see more of it, isn’t it? Since I don’t intend on leaving here until I’ve slit your throat.”

“Who do you imagine you are facing, Shizuki Ametatsu?” Byakuya stiffened at this, indignation in his grey eyes. “Because you saw to slaughter one careless noble Shinigami, you think that you can be executioner for all of us? That belief is foolish and naive. Did you really not learn anything in your years in the Gotei-13, after all?”

“I learnt not to trust those who were born with silver spoons in their mouths.” Uryuu’s voice shook as he flung his hand out in a second attack, and Byakuya’s eyes narrowed as he flicked Senbonzakura’s hilt to counter it. “I learnt that the so called ability you people have is not about ability at all, but money and influence buying your way up the Gotei-13. I know that you sneer and look down on all of those below you, and you always have done. Shihouin Hirohito. Kuchiki Ginrei. And you’re no different, are you? You, Kuchiki-bocchan, who is determined to keep Niji away from me.”

“You are mad.” Byakuya snorted. “Completely devoid of reason. And utterly misled.”

His eyes narrowed, as Senbonzakura’s glittering petals swarmed down towards Uryuu, and the Quincy cursed, lifting his hilt just in time to bring his rain-shards back to deflect them.

“You have utterly misunderstood in so many ways what being a member of the Noble Houses means.” Byakuya continued coolly, sweeping his blade around for a second attempt. “You killed a

Shihouin, so I hear. He must have been a weak and foolish soul, then, for one like you to defeat him. Besides, I am not a Shihouin. I am a Kuchiki. Of all the great houses, mine rank above in power, influence and potential. And I am not Kuchiki Ginrei. I am Kuchiki *Byakuya*. I am the son of that house trained to lead the Clan because I had potential even my grandfather did not. My *reiryoku* far surpasses yours, Shizuki. You will die here… and it will be by my hand."

"We'll see about that!" Uryuu snapped back, summoning the shards of his weapon back into a glimmering blade as light glittered around the fingers of his right hand. "*Byakurai!*"

"Do you think such feeble Kidou could touch me?" Byakuya shook his head impatiently, swinging Senbonzakura's fragments back around to deflect the blast, before reforming his weapon into one single blade. "Just because our blades both divide, it does not mean that they are equal. You will have to learn this the hard way, it seems… I will have to show you, if you will not believe my words."

"You nobility are always full of boasts and threats." Uryuu said angrily. "Always full of ideas and values and forcing them on other people when they don't matter. Hard work is the only difference between Shinigami like me and Shinigami like you. You didn't earn your *haori*. You inherited it. You didn't fight from the bottom to get to where you are… you were gifted everything and fawned over at every step. And all of you… all of you are the same. Kuchiki. Shihouin. All of you. You follow your own code and you'll bend and twist the truth if it gets you what you want! Shihouin Hirohito was the one who took Niji's life. He ordered the men to slit her throat just as sure as anything. But even so, you keep Niji's soul away from me! As though I was the dangerous one! As though if you do that, somehow, you can keep it a secret about what he did to the Quincy!"

Byakuya stared at his opponent for a moment, taking in the wild, reckless flares of *reiryoku* that surrounded the boy's aura, and he frowned, registering for the first time that, although it was undoubtedly a Captain's level Shinigami who stood before him, there was still something not right. The sword, instead of glittering in harmony with his master almost seemed to be screaming out in protest, as though being dragged into a battle it had no will to fight, and, as he analysed the sensation more carefully, Byakuya realised why. Anger pierced through him as he recognised the faint, almost untraceable taint of outside interference lacing the soul's core, and he shook his head impatiently.

"This is pointless. Discussion is futile." He said softly, raising his

sword as he prepared to release it once more. “I understand now why it is you will not see reason, or speak with any sanity. You have been poisoned by one who seeks to make you sink further into the madness that drove you that day. You are not one I should consider an equal opponent. You are an aberration, and I shall destroy you.”

“Byakuya!” Ichigo exclaimed, and Byakuya turned his head to glare at the boy.

“Have I not already told you?” He snapped. “This is not your friend. No part of Ishida Uryuu remains. This creature is Shizuki Ametatsu — a mad, depraved beast driven to desperate acts by outside interference as much as by his past sins. There is only one way forward. I must kill him, else he will hurt others — perhaps ones like Inoue Orihime, who cannot so easily defend themselves.”

“But, dammit, you’ll be killing Ishida!”

“How many times must I repeat it? *Ishida Uryuu is not here!*”

“The Taichou’s right, Ichigo.” Renji’s voice was sombre. “Think about it. That kid’s spouted enough crap about pride an’ honour an’ shit since you first came here. He’s a Quincy, ain’t he? Do you think he’d want this? To be turned into a mad, homicidal Shinigami an’ to hurt people without it bein’ his will? He wouldn’t. He’d hate it. We both know it.”

“But…”

“In this situation, it’s more shame to live than to die.” Renji said frankly. “Havin’ fought in 11-Bantai… havin’ seen my fair share of battles… it’s like that, Ichigo. I don’t like it. You don’t like it. But the Taichou’s right. Ishida’s gone. There ain’t even the faintest trace of him in that creature’s reiatsu, an’ he has to be stopped. An’ you know… Ishida’d be the first one to tell you to kill him. Because like this, he ain’t himself. An’ he’d hate that most of all, you know. Being like this.”

Byakuya met his Vice Captain’s gaze for a moment, as a brief flicker of understanding passed between them, and he nodded.

“It seems you have learnt more than I thought.” He murmured. “Thank you, Renji. At least one of you understands that this is not a simple case of kill or be killed.”

He shrugged.

“That boy cannot defeat me. He does not have the power or the coordination with his *zanpakutou* to do so.” He added evenly. “The

simplest thing, therefore, is for me to dispose of him quickly and cleanly. If it is by my blade, there will be no lingering regret, after all. You should be grateful to me, Kurosaki Ichigo. You would not like, I think, for your friend's blood to be staining Zangetsu's blade."

"You really do talk too much."

At that moment something whizzed by Byakuya's ear, slicing across his cheek and the Captain turned, reaching his left hand up to his face as he felt the first trickle of warm blood begin to run down towards his chin. His eyes narrowed as he glared at Uryuu darkly, and the Quincy shot him a derisive look.

"I could easily have skewered you, in that split-second, but I thought I'd wake you up instead." He said softly. "I could have killed you, because you were wide open. I'm not a fool, Kuchiki-bocchan. But you're lucky. I was trained by Ukitake-taichou. And he didn't teach me to attack an enemy from behind — or to take the coward's way and fight them when they were off guard."

"Did Ukitake also teach you to attack people with whom you have no existing grievance?" Byakuya asked coldly, wiping the blood away as he refocused his attention on the battle. "I cannot imagine that particular lesson came from him. Or, for that matter, taking the law into your own hands and slaying a fellow Captain in a fit of pique?"

"What do you know about it?" Uryuu demanded, his body tensing, and Byakuya snorted, shaking his head.

"Where Ukitake is concerned, plenty, I imagine." he said derisively. "And as far as you are, I have little interest to learn more. *Chire, Senbonzakura*."

"*Shakka-hou!*" As Byakuya divided his blade once more, Uryuu's fingers glittered with red light, a huge fireball blazing across the squad courtyard and Byakuya disappeared, re-materialising across the courtyard as he arched his weapon's gleaming petals around to deflect the attack from hitting the squad office square on. Fury glittered in his grey eyes as he wheeled on his companion angrily.

"I thought you said you were not a coward." He said in low tones. "Yet you would attack and kill the members of my squad who are within those buildings simply in order to right an imagined grievance against me? *I* am your opponent. You will fight *me*, and not involve them. Do you understand? Ukitake would never have condoned that kind of reckless attack. If he saw you now, he would be ashamed of ever having trained you, seeing the way you've come to fight."

“I told you already, I’d raze the squad offices to the ground if it helped me retrieve Niji.” Uryuu stood his ground, though Byakuya was aware of his *reiryoku* flaring even more wildly as he struggled to pour as much power as he could into his still-screaming blade. “Ukitake-taichou would have understood why. He knew that Niji shouldn’t have been killed. He would have understood.”

“You really are friggin’ insane, aren’t you?” Renji put in at that moment. “If you think for a moment Ukitake-taichou’d stand back an’ let you behave like a wild animal jus’ because you can’t get you own way. Rukia said you were from Rukongai — like her an’ like me — but right now you’re puttin’ the lot of us to shame, actin’ like you’ve the right to kill anyone you like jus’ because you think they’re in your way.”

He narrowed his gaze.

“That’s what Aizen an’ the others wanted to do.” He said coldly. “An’ you’re no better than they are, actin’ like this.”

“In any case, this battle will soon end.” Byakuya spread his fingers, regathering the petals of Senbonzakura’s Shikai in order to launch a final attack. “He is tiring, and he will not keep holding out forever. You may have drawn blood from me, Shizuki Ametatsu, but you are not strong enough to defeat me. That is blatantly obvious — a man who cannot fully command his *zanpakutou* poses a Kuchiki no threat at all.”

“I haven’t even begun to release my blade yet.” Uryuu said flatly, bringing the weapon back together and raising it above his head as, little by little, clouds began to gather above 6-Bantai, growing ever darker and more dense with each passing second. “Don’t get cocky, Kuchiki-bocchan. You see, your weapon might be elegant, and I don’t know how many pretty pink shards you can separate it into by releasing it that way. But even so, it’s still just a blade. It still has a limit as to how many blades it can produce. *Senbon* Zakura, correct? A thousand petals is nothing in comparison to what my sword can do. Hassuiryou isn’t confined to a finite number of divisions. In fact, I don’t even have to split the blade in order to command my attacks. Hassuiryou has another name, after all… do you know what that might be?”

“The Rain Dragon.” Ichigo murmured, and Uryuu’s gaze flitted across to him, slowly nodding his head.

“Did Niji tell you that?” He demanded, and Ichigo’s eyes narrowed.

“Stop friggin’ talking about Niji, dammit!” He exclaimed.

“Byakuya’s goin’ to friggin’ kill you if you don’t get a grip — dammit, Ishida, snap out of it already! We get that you’re pissed off — now *stop* it! Inoue believes you’re still in there, and I want to believe you are too — so for God’s sake kick this nutjob back to wherever he came from, before Byakuya turns you into sashimi!”

Uryuu’s gaze hardened, and he shook his head impatiently.

“The rogue is right, though.” He said, showing no indication that Ichigo’s words had affected him in the slightest, and as Byakuya gauged his reiatsu, he realised that if there had been any response at all, it had only been the merest flicker in the surging, flowing flood of spiritual energy that currently engulfed the young boy’s soul. “*Ame no Ryuu*. The Rain Dragon. And do you know why he had that nickname, Kuchiki-bocchan? Let me tell you. Because his power — his true power — is to command the rain.”

He glanced up, and Byakuya saw a flare of lightning strike through the dark clouds, piercing them with a brief moment of light.

“You will wish I hadn’t shown you this release.” Uryuu murmured softly. “This attack is called the Dragon’s Storm… the rain that falls is as sharp as needles, and coated in water heated by the lightning you just saw blaze across the clouds. If it doesn’t pierce through your very soul, it will scald you wherever it touches. Through your *haori*, through your *hakama*, through your very skin to the core. That is the power of the Rain Dragon’s Shikai. So far we’ve only been playing party games. Now the real battle begins.”

His eyes narrowed.

“*Ryuu no Arashi.*”

As soon as the words left his lips, the clouds over the squad buildings parted to release hundreds upon thousands of tiny rain droplets, each one glittering with a sinister light as Byakuya realised that Uryuu’s words had been true. They were more than simply rain, but tiny needles of metal coated in the slick substance, and as he brought back Senbonzakura’s fragments to deflect them, an amused smile touched Uryuu’s lips as he pointed the sword tip in Byakuya’s direction, guiding the force of the shower towards the Captain.

“But if you use your weapon like that, how will you fight me?” He asked mockingly. “And what will you do if I double the rain? Or triple it? This is just for starters. Don’t underestimate me because I’m from Rukongai, rich boy. I’m not as easy to take down as people think I am.”

“So what, you’re going to *rain* us all to death?” Renji demanded, shielding Rukia’s still body from stray shards of rain with the sleeve of his *hakama* as he cast the Quincy a disparaging glare. “What the hell kind of an attack is that?”

“An effective one.” Uryuu said calmly, though there was true madness dancing in his indigo eyes and once more Byakuya felt the faintes trace of someone else’s hand at work. “You see, Rukongai Vice Captain-san, so long as there’s water, Hassuiryou can make rain. And so long as there’s rain, Hassuiryou can attack. It’s simple science, really. One blade can’t compete with all the water in the surrounding atmosphere.”

“Then you are the foolish one, since 6-Bantai’s courtyard is hardly overflowing with water.” Byakuya said flatly, and Uryuu snorted, shaking his head.

“It doesn’t have to be.” He said simply. “If I run out of water, other liquid will suffice. *Your* blood, perhaps. Or, if not that…”

His gaze flitted to the unconscious Rukia.

“Perhaps hers.” He murmured, twitching the tip of his weapon towards the huddled spectators as the storm began to spread across the sky. “Since she’s of no greater use right now, after all.”

“Dammit, Shizuki, you dare lay another finger on her…”

Renji was on his feet in a moment, but Byakuya held up his left hand, shaking his head.

“Renji, I have already told you that I do not require your interference. Attend to your orders and protect Rukia.”

“But Taichou!”

“If you are so driven to use your sword, release your Bankai and use it to shield yourselves from the rain.” Byakuya did not even look at him, his gaze fixed firmly on his opponent. “I am perfectly capable of handling everything else.”

“You might think you’re making the rules, but they seem fair game to me.” Uryuu reflected. “It upsets you, doesn’t it, Kuchiki-bocchan… the idea of her getting hurt? I can see it, prickling in your aura… you’re angry because I’ve threatened her. She’s your weakness, then? She’s the one you’ll protect? I see. That makes it interesting. Maybe you’ll fight me more seriously, then, if I draw her blood and use it to fight against you.”

He flexed his fingers, as blue light glittered from the tips.

"*Souren soukatsui!*"

"*Bankai! Hihiou Zabimaru*!"

Before the flare of blue energy could make contact, Renji's sword flared with reddish pink light, shimmering and morphing into the huge snake-like form of his bankai, and, as the shadow of the beast fell over 6-Bantai, Byakuya was aware of its roar as it absorbed the attack in its massive jaws. For a moment, Renji's reiatsu flickered, as though he was still debating entering the battle. Then, as the rain began to fall ever harder against the ground, he lowered the bone-like hilt, and as Zabimaru curled protectively around the huddled trio, Byakuya felt a mixture of relief and gratitude touch his heart.

Renji *had* understood, then. And, though every inch of him was straining to fight, he had put Rukia's safety first and chosen to protect her.

"This is a fight between you and me, Shizuki." Byakuya met Uryuu's defiant gaze with an impassive one. "And I will not tolerate any further attempts to change that. As you see, my Vice Captain is not an easy opponent, either. Senbonzakura will probably grant you a quicker death than being snatched up in Zabimaru's jaws, I imagine — and I will not allow you to try and bring others into a fight that is nothing to do with them. This ends now."

"I'm not done yet and neither are you." Uryuu's breaths was coming more heavily, and sweat beaded his brow as his beleagured body struggled once more to gather its shredded shards of *reiryoku* into enough energy to fight. "You might think you can deflect my rain, but I have another level yet and I'm not beaten by a long shot. I'm not easily taken down, and I don't give up."

"You think that, in that condition, your sword will allow you to summon its Bankai?" Byakuya was incredulous. "When you can barely school it to do the basic attacks that every ranking squad Shinigami should be able to master without any trouble at all? You will lose your life sooner. If the sword even obeys you… it may turn on you, and finish you itself."

"Hassuiryou is my partner!" This seemed to incense Uryuu further, as the sword glittered with light. "He and I have fought together for a long time and he'd *never* betray me!"

"He's weak because you are." Byakuya said acerbically. "I will say it again. Captain or otherwise, you are in no fit state to raise Bankai. You delay between attacks as you struggle to gather enough energy to fire them. Your Kidou is powerful, but you are still weak. And…"

"*Souren soukatsui*!"

Before Byakuya could finish, Uryuu sent another flaring blaze of blue energy across the squad building, and Byakuya narrowed his gaze, spreading his left hand as golden light prickled from his fingertips.

"*Raikouhou*." He murmured, as a flow of amber lightning shot across the courtyard, colliding with and obliterating the enemy attack in an instant and sending a huge flare of heat and energy up into the atmosphere. As he did so, steam began to hiss from the gathered clouds and the splintered, rain-coated shards began to fall harmlessly to the ground, the water that had guided them completely evaporated by the force of Byakuya's Kidou.

Despite himself, Uryuu looked taken aback, and Byakuya nodded.

"You have no options left." He said quietly. "You are not strong enough to call your sword's Bankai. You cannot match my Kidou. And you have barely scratched either me or Senbonzakura in your attempts to attack. You will not hurt my sister or my squad, for the hide of Renji's Zabimaru is adequate defence against anything your confused blade might produce. This battle is over. You have lost."

"Don't patronise me." Uryuu snapped, and Byakuya sighed, his gaze flitting momentarily to where Rukia was sheltered in the curved arc of Zabimaru's spiked segments.

"I should slit your throat here and now." He murmured. "But if I did that, Rukia would be sad."

"Byakuya?" Ichigo's voice was full of disbelief, but Byakuya paid him no heed, his eyes narrowing as he made up his mind.

"This is your last chance, Shizuki Ametatsu." He said softly, meeting his opponent head on as he drew Senbonzakura's fragments back into a complete blade. "Relinquish your hold on Ishida Uryuu's body. Draw back and submit… give the boy back his life. If you do this, I will not fight you any more."

"Taichou!" Renji sounded startled, and Byakuya pursed his lips.

"Well?" He asked. "Rukia would wish me to at least give you that opportunity, whilst you have still yet to cause a person's death."

For a moment Uryuu did not answer, and Byakuya could tell that he was still struggling to control his sword's power into a complete, stable force.

Then he frowned, straightening his body as resolve flooded through

him anew.

"I won't be patronised by a Kuchiki." He murmured, his tones low and angry. "I thought Kuchiki Ginrei was at least fair-minded, but even he betrayed me in the end. And you… you don't want to help me. You took Niji away from me and you keep doing it, even though you know that it's wrong. I'm going to fight you and I'm going to kill you, Kuchiki Byakuya. I'm going to bring out the Rain Dragon's true form, and God help all of you when I flood 6-Bantai with his Bankai's power."

Byakuya sighed, for a moment his heart feeling heavy as he realised that his attempt had fallen on deaf ears.

"At least, when she asks, I can tell her I gave you that chance." He murmured. "Very well. If you persist in this nonsense, I have no choice but to stop you by force. You will not live long enough to raise your Bankai, Shizuki — I guarantee you that."

His eyes narrowed, and slowly he shook his head, even as he flipped his weapon over so that the blade pointed towards the ground.

"I'm sorry, Ishida Uryuu." He murmured. "Shinigami too fight with pride, however… and for your sake as much as Seireitei's… I *will* finish this."

Author's Note

This is the chapter my computer originally ate. So if this write sucks, I'm sorry. I did my best. It's very hard to recapture the original inspiration and spirit for a scene once it's been deleted by unseen forces.

That is partly why the word 'deja-vu' appears in the first line, by the way. Because, believe me, Kyouraku, Ukitake and I have been there and done this before already once this week.

As for the fight scene… I just hope it works. It just about did the first time and I've tried to stick to the same rules. But it was a pain in the ass to write the first time, and the rewrite was no easier.
Please be kind…

Oh yeah. For anyone who hasn't read the pendulum chapter, 'Dai-senpai' is Kyouraku's way of referring to Unohana :)

Additional: Anyone wondering why a story called Halcyon Days appeared and then vanished from my server, you're not going mad. This is a Byaku/Ukitake omake but I uploaded it with this chapter which is too soon — it should go up with the next chapter so I've

taken it down again. If you've read it, then you've read it — but not many people did before I got to it ;)

My apologies for the inconvenience. It'll be reloaded at the next update.

Chapter Twenty Four: Into The Crossfire

Chapter Twenty Four: Into The Crossfire

"*Wait!*"

As Byakuya's hand was about to loosen on the hilt of Senbonzakura, a fresh voice entered the conflict, and both the Captain of the Sixth Division and the rogue Shinigami turned as one, gauging the appearance of the newcomer with a mixture of surprise and irritation.

"Ukitake." Byakuya was the first one to speak, his grey eyes narrowing. "What are *you* doing here? This is in hand — I don't need any help."

"Ukitake… taichou?" Uryuu's eyes widened for a moment, and from his shelter, Ichigo saw the blue haze of reiatsu flicker slightly, as if Ametatsu's focus to fight had been broken by the sudden appearance of his former Captain. Ukitake turned his head at the sound of his name, a grave smile touching his lips. Though he was very pale, and moving in a cautious, tentative way, there was resolution in his dark brown eyes, and Ichigo realised that the man had left his sick bed once again to help them in their quest. His eyes narrowed, digesting this fact slowly.

So Ukitake-san's connection to this Shizuki guy is deeper'n any of us suspected, then. Sendin' the letter wasn't enough in the end. For him t'go this far — it can't just be for Ishida's sake. Can it? Does he really care so much about savin' one Quincy's life that he'll drag himself up when he's sick to stand in front of Byakuya's blade?

At Byakuya's curt question, Ukitake nodded his head.

"You should lower your sword, Shizuki." He said quietly, his voice level and calm despite the fact that he had just walked into a battle between two souls with top level reiatsu, and Ichigo found the 13-Bantai Captain rising once more in his estimation. "Byakuya isn't your enemy. And you can't keep doing this. It isn't fair."

Uryuu's eyes narrowed, his grasp tightening around the hilt of his blade as he turned back to glance at the cold, stiff form of the 6-Bantai Captain. Ichigo's eyes widened slightly as he realised that, where his friend's reiatsu had burned with complete madness a mere moment earlier, now it's flickers and flares reflected far more clearly the

troubled, grief-stricken soul of a Shinigami Captain in better command of his senses.

So what, then? Is he mad, or isn't he? Did Ukitake-san do something, or… is it Ishida, after all? Or just… I dunno… but the change… it was almost instantaneous. As soon as he saw Ukitake-san… it was like he became a completely different kind of opponent.

"This isn't your fight, Taichou. I don't want to involve you — please, step aside."

Uryuu's voice was soft, full of both defiance and regret, his stance as resolute as one who had made his choice and intended to stick by it, yet even so, Ichigo did not get the sense that the earlier waves of madness were still dominating his actions.

"I concur." Byakuya's entire form bristled with frustration and impatience, though he did not attempt to raise his weapon in Ukitake's direction. "Stand aside, Ukitake. I can deal with this situation. I require no other help."

"Yes, I know." Ukitake's expression became sober, and he nodded his head. "I know as well as anyone the strength that both of you share, and I realise that neither one of you need the interference of a sickly old man to settle your differences. Yet I am going to say it again. Stop this, now. It is a fight that must not carry on — Byakuya, you at least must realise the foolhardiness of what you are doing."

At this blatant piece of scolding, Byakuya's already stiff form became even more rigid, and despite the situation Ichigo could not help but stifle a smile. So there were people in Soul Society, after all, who could speak to Byakuya in that manner without being cut down by Senbonzakura's sweeping blade!

"I am not as sentimental as you are." He said now, his tones cold and full of censure. "I see no problem with eradicating someone who is clearly a danger to Soul Society. You know it as well as I do, Ukitake. I read your letter and I understood its meaning as well as I understood your plea. If the boy receives the sword, you said. You told me yourself of the dangers that blade can unleash — and therefore, the owner who wielded it and the risk he poses, too. I gave him his chance to retreat from the boy's body, and he refused. You cannot therefore expect me to stand aside whilst someone of that calibre walks the streets of Seireitei? He is a threat. My job is to eliminate such threats. No matter what your feelings are, Ukitake, if you stand between us, you will be in breach of your duty as a Captain."

"If you slay him, Byakuya, you will be in breach of yours as a

Shinigami." Ukitake strode across the ground, reaching out to put a hand on Byakuya's sword arm. "Or does the life of Ishida Uryuu not count for anything in all of this?"

"*That* is not Ishida Uryuu." Byakuya shook his companion's arm off, flicking Senbonzakura's blade in the angry Uryuu's direction. "*That* is the criminal Shizuki Ametatsu. A man who, by your own testimony, was guilty of serious felonies against Soul Society. A man who even tried to slay the Sou Taichou himself. As I said, I am not sentimental in the way you are. Whatever his form may have been before, he is no longer that person. He is one who is a threat and must be eliminated."

"Get out of the way, Taichou, please." Uryuu spoke up at that moment, tapping his own blade in agitation on the ground as though uncertain for the first time about what to do. "It's not my wish to fight you. I told you that before, right? That I wouldn't fight you."

"Yes, Shizuki. I remember that. I remember it well." Ukitake turned, nodding his head as he regarded the Quincy gravely. "But it's come too far for me to be able to do anything else. You understand, don't you? Things have changed. And you have to stop, now. The past is past. It's over. All of it… it's long over."

"Over…?" Uryuu sounded bewildered, and Ukitake nodded again.

"Sheath your blade, Byakuya." He instructed, without taking his gaze from the Quincy's glimmering form. "If you do not, I will be forced to make you do so. It's not my wish to fight with either of you. But I won't let you fight with the boy. Not so long as there's a chance of recovering Ishida Uryuu alive… I'm fairly sure that, of the two of you, you stand a better chance than he does of surviving the full thrust of Sougyo no Kotowari's attacks."

"You would fight me to protect a rebel and a murderer?" Byakuya stared, his usual composure momentarily shattered by Ukitake's bold statement. "Even though you are barely fit to stand, Ukitake, you would still unseal your blade and challenge me?"

Ukitake sighed.

"I would fight you to protect the life of an innocent, yes." He said levelly. "Whatever the cost to myself."

"And the cost to Seireitei?" Byakuya snorted. "In sacrificing yourself to my blade… in trying to harm me… in protecting one who has killed before in madness? You forget your position, Ukitake. Even the Sou Taichou will not look well on such a blatant disregard for the rules."

Ukitake's eyes narrowed, and for the first time Ichigo saw a flicker of stubborn steeliness cross the older man's gaze, negating in an instant the kindly, genial aura that he and his friends had come to associate with the amiable Captain of 13-Bantai.

"I am telling you to sheath your sword, Kuchiki-taichou" He said quietly, his tones hoarse yet somehow every word challenged the noble Captain to defy him. "For the first thing, you would only be giving Shizuki the oblivion he seeks, in any case. For the second, you would be ending the life of one who is an innocent in all of this, and that I cannot condone. That would make *you* the murderer, which you are wise enough to have reasoned out for yourself. For the third — even with me in this physical state, there is no guarantee that you would be able to defeat me. And for the last thing…"

He smiled suddenly, tapping Byakuya's sword arm once more.

"You are the same." He said softly. "You and he. Of all people in Soul Society, Byakuya, you above all others understand the things that were racing through Shizuki's mind and heart the day he killed Shihouin Hirohito and the members of his squad."

"*What* did you say?" Byakuya started, staring at the senior Captain in disbelief, and Ukitake spread his hands.

"You lost Hisana." He said lightly. "And Shizuki lost Niji. You both understand the true depth of a grief that none of the rest of us can possibly hope to understand. Of all people, Byakuya, you should comprehend best of all what Shizuki has been through."

"How *dare* you bring Hisana's name into this!" Almost as soon as the words had left Ukitake's lips, Byakuya reacted, and Ichigo's eyes widened as he saw a flare of pure rage flood the nobleman's usually composed expression. All through the 6-Bantai Captain's reiatsu prickled an angry fire that seemed to dance and glitter from his body, and Ichigo muttered a curse, struggling to understand the sudden flood of emotion that had animated the normally distant Byakuya's tall frame.

"Because it's the truth." Ukitake seemed unperturbed by Byakuya's uncharacteristic show of fury. "Shizuki lost his love too, just as you did. You have no reason to fight him. The two of you are the same."

"Ukitake, if you *dare* say another word…" Byakuya was well and truly riled now, and from his position across from Ichigo, Renji let out a low whistle.

"Shit, the Taichou's pissed now." He muttered. "I ain't never seen

him like that before — not in all the years I've seen him fight. Ukitake-taichou must have a death wish — sayin' shit like that an' in front of other people."

"Ukitake-san doesn't seem at all worried about it." Ichigo hissed back. "I didn't realise the old guy was so tough."

"No kidding." Renji agreed fervently. "Damn, an' I thought I could take the Taichou, but I got a long way t'go before I'd throw myself up against him when he looked like that."

"How *dare* you compare me to a madman." Byakuya's eyes glittered with cold fury. "How *dare* you compare me to a traitor who slew his comrade and marched on Soul Society in order to take down the Sou Taichou himself! *How dare you*…"

"Shizuki was not mad." Ukitake said quietly. "He was angry and he was hurt — and now those emotions are being heightened and manipulated by the hand of another. He lost someone he loved and he took vengeance on the one he considered responsible. But he was not mad. No more so than you are now, raising your weapon against him."

"*You* were the one who told Rukia that." Byakuya's eyes narrowed to slits. "*You* were the one who…"

"I lied." Ukitake cut across him, a flicker of resignation touching his expression. "I lied two hundred years ago, and I lied again when your sister came to ask me questions. I've been lying about it a long time, Byakuya, if you want to know the truth."

"*What* did you say?" Byakuya's expression became one of shock, and Ukitake nodded.

"Shizuki was a subordinate I valued greatly for a long, long time." He admitted gravely. "What he did was inexcusable, yet I was too fond of him to allow his soul to be obliterated just on the say-so of the Shihouin-ke. The times were different from these times, after all — I doubt Yoruichi would have pressed so hard for things to be settled that way. The first crime was Shihouin Hirohito's. Everyone knew that. But the Shihouin-ke were powerful and Shizuki was a man from Rukongai. Shihouin Hirohito did not survive his battle of swords, but he still engaged in it on equal terms and was killed as a result of it. It was a brutal and bloody conflict, but a fair fight between two men capable of defending themselves to a high level of fighting ability. However, the Quincy Hirohito ordered killed were, many of them, innocents. Men, women and children alike. Unarmed humans who had surrendered their bows in the belief that the Shinigami would treat

them fairly… and struck down for that belief in cold blood. Shizuki's actions were vigilante and driven by his feelings, true enough. He should not have acted without seeking support from at least your Grandfather if not Soul Society itself. But had the Shihouin-ke not had so much power over the hearing… and had I been able to prevent Shizuki from running to his own death… things may have ended differently."

"Shizuki Ametatsu tried to kill the Sou Taichou." Byakuya said flatly, and Ukitake frowned.

"Shizuki tried to end his own life." He corrected sadly. "In the only way he knew for certain how."

For a moment Byakuya hesitated, then he shook his head.

"That is neither here nor there." He said frankly. "Whatever happened two hundred years ago, this creature has already vandalised my squad buildings. He is clearly not of sound mind… and he must be removed."

"If you raise Senbonzakura against me, Byakuya, you'll be in breach of regulations." Ukitake was unperturbed. "I've already told you, lower your blade. This is foolish behaviour for one in your position, and you know it as well as I do."

To Ichigo's surprise, Byakuya's expression became one of sullen defiance, and for a moment it looked like he intended on wielding Senbonzakura anyway, releasing it once more to attack the 13-Bantai Captain at point blank range. Then, very slowly, he seemed to regain his wits, and he sighed, lowering the weapon ever so slowly until it trailed against the fabric of his *haori*.

"I won't forgive you for using Hisana's name so freely." He said coldly, and Ichigo heard a note of uncharacteristic petulance in his voice.

"I'm sorry, then, that I've made you so upset." Ukitake's words were sincere, his tone almost like an indulgent grandfather placating an angry child. "But I have orders too, you know. Protecting the visitors to Soul Society is one of those orders — for all of us Captains. Ishida-kun came here for our help, and so far we're not having much success in helping him. That's why I came here today. Because I didn't want you to do something we'd all regret."

He smiled slightly.

"You are more sentimental than you like to admit, I think." He added, his gaze flitting briefly to the still unconscious Rukia who Renji

had been guarding so protectively inside the curled shadow of Zabimaru's Bankai form. "You raised your blade to defend Rukia, after all — didn't you?"

Byakuya flinched, but did not answer, and Ichigo stared at him, fascinated by the nobleman's sulky, scolded-child attitude.

Ukitake seemed satisfied, however, for he turned his back once more on the resentful 6-Bantai Captain, crossing the ground purposefully towards the bewildered Uryuu and reaching out his hands to rest them on the boy's shoulders.

"You understand, don't you, Shizuki?" He asked quietly, looking Uryuu straight in the eyes. "That this is all wrong. That this body, even… is not your own. That Niji is no longer here — that you won't find her by fighting people like Byakuya and adding to the crimes you committed two hundred years ago. You know it, don't you? I see it in your eyes and I know you do. You died once already. You've been at rest for a long time. And whatever force woke you, it's not fair to make an innocent boy suffer in your stead."

"You called him… Ishida-kun." Uryuu said faintly. "But… that was Niji…"

"Niji was an Ishida too, yes." Ukitake agreed gently. "Ishida Uryuu-kun is a descendant of that clan. He's a Quincy, Shizuki. A Quincy of the Ishida clan who survived into the present day, holding on to those values that your Niji believed in with her heart and soul."

Uryuu's eyes widened, and Ukitake smiled.

"And even more than that, there's something else." He said softly. "The one who you challenged in Karakura — Kurosaki Ichigo-kun — he came here because he wanted to help Ishida-kun — and you — to resolve this properly. Ichigo-kun is a Shinigami. Ishida-kun is a Quincy. Yet they fight on the same side. Isn't that what you went to the Real World to achieve, all those years ago? Isn't that why all that blood was shed? It wasn't shed in vain. Do you understand? You didn't fail, in the end. And there's no need to keep raising your sword against Soul Society."

"Ukitake… taichou." Uryuu's fingers loosened around the hilt of his *zanpakutou*, which clattered to the ground unnoticed as his focus on the battle faded. "But…"

"In the Real World, you saw terrible things done to the Quincy." Ukitake continued gently. "I know that. You told me it yourself, the day you came back here with Shihouin Hirohito's blood still staining

your robes. And I know you regretted it even then, when you told me what you'd done. I know that, even through your anger and grief, you already felt remorse. It couldn't bring Niji back, after all. It wasn't right. Was it?"

"I…" Slowly Uryuu sank down onto the ground, burying his head in his hands.

"Everything was rushing through me." He murmured. "Anger and hate and fear and… I didn't know why or how but… I had to fight. Even though Hassuiryou was… was telling me not to, somehow I… I had to. So I did. Because I thought… if I did… if I did… then it would stop."

He raised a hopeless gaze to his former Captain, pain and distress in his indigo eyes.

"I wanted to make it stop." He said brokenly. "I wanted… to make *me* stop. So I kept fighting. Because I didn't want… to kill… anyone else."

"I know." Ukitake rested a reassuring hand on his former subordinate's head.

"To fight like that so easily… I really did become a monster, didn't I?"

"No. Not a monster." Ukitake's tones were gentle and soothing. "The night Shihouin was killed wasn't your true nature, and today isn't your fault. Someone else has played a part in this and those emotions that flooded you when Niji died are being distorted out of their true order. You're not a murderer at heart, I know that. I didn't train that Shizuki, after all, did I?"

"I don't…"

"You came to me that night because you didn't know who else to go to." Ukitake added quietly. "But even then you knew that there was no going back. You burned your *haori* because you were angry with Seireitei, but also because you were angry with yourself. And you took off to face the Sou Taichou because you knew that, if you did something as outrageous as that, he would be bound to act against you. You went looking for that closure, didn't you? You went to fight him in order to die."

He looked sad.

"And I, weak and ill as I was that day, hadn't the physical strength to stop you." He added regretfully. "But today, I'll stop you. I won't let

you fight any more, Shizuki. Even if you are seeking a return to that oblivion by challenging one like Byakuya to the death, this is not right. I will not let you harm that boy's body any further, so I advise you listen to me instead. Ishida Uryuu is Niji's relative — a descendant of that same family who put their trust in you two hundred years ago. You can't help Niji — you can't turn back time. This is Ishida-kun's time — Ishida-kun's fight. It isn't yours. Not this time."

For a moment there was silence, then Uryuu let out a heavy sigh.

"I told you then, Taichou, that I wouldn't fight you. That bloody as my blade was, it would never be raised against you." He said heavily, his tone thick with regret and guilt as he raised his gaze to the Captain's understanding brown ones. "I won't go back on it now. I already shamed you enough, after all, didn't I? All the work you put into training with me, and helping me to become a Captain — I already threw it back in your face when I did the things I did. Didn't I?"

"Mistakes are easy to regret in hindsight." Ukitake murmured. "You're not the only one who's ever made them."

He smiled ruefully.

"Believe me, the mistakes I've made over the years could fill an encyclopaedia all on their own." He added sadly. "But we move on, Shizuki. We have to. For the sake of everyone else… and for our own sake, too."

Uryuu digested this for a moment. Then he met his former colleague's gaze.

"I didn't move on." He said softly. "I fought… I killed… I died. Didn't I? All of those things… hazy as they seem now… are real. And I went to the Sou Taichou because I didn't want to fight any more. Not with… not with blood staining Hassuiryou's blade like it did that night."

"I don't doubt that for one minute." Ukitake assured him gently. "I trained you, and I know the kind of man you were. One moment of rash recklessness doesn't change the good things a person has done. Or that they're capable of doing, either. That's why I wanted your soul reborn, Shizuki. This life was over… but I knew you had potential to be strong again in the future. I'm sorry if that's meant you've suffered more pain. But I don't regret asking for it. Only this way… is wrong. This is Ishida-kun's body. You have to let him decide how he should use it."

Shizuki's expression became wistful, and he nodded his head.

"Hassuiryou's saying the same, now I'm bothering to listen to him." He whispered, reaching out his hand to brush the hilt of his sword almost reverently as he did so. "And it's all right with me, too. I don't need to be here, after all. I'll just make more mistakes and curse him too, if I am."

His fingers closed around the sword hilt, and he closed his eyes.

"I'm leaving it to you, Hassuiryou." He added softly. "From hereon in… he's all yours."

For a moment, the sword was bathed in a soft, azure glow. Then as soon as the light had come, it faded, and Uryuu swayed, putting his hands out to steady himself against the reassuring hardness of the ground below.

Ukitake hesitated for a moment, then crouched at the boy's side, gently helping him to his feet.

"Ishida-kun?" He murmured. "Are you all right?"

"Uki… take… san?" Uryuu murmured blurrily, and Ichigo let out an exclamation, hurrying across the ground as he realised his friend once more had control of his body.

"Ishida!"

"Give him a moment, Ichigo-kun." Ukitake held up his hand, offering the redhead a smile. "He's all right. Just a little tired, I imagine. He's had quite a busy day."

Byakuya's eyes narrowed, as he slipped Senbonzakura back into its sheath.

"I trust then that I can leave the rest to you to handle, Ukitake?" He said coolly, his composure once more back in place, and Ukitake nodded his head.

"Yes. I think that to be the right thing." He agreed. "Thank you, Byakuya."

Byakuya's eyes narrowed, but he did not respond. Instead he turned his gaze towards Renji, flicking his hand in Rukia's direction.

"Renji, Zabimaru is no longer needed. Re-seal him and bring Rukia back inside the 6-Bantai quarters." He said flatly. "Until the felon's spirit has left Seireitei, I do not want her entering 13-Bantai's headquarters — so for the time being, I intend her to stay where I can keep a close eye on her."

“Yes, sir.” Renji looked startled, but nodded, flicking the bone-like hilt of his sword as Zabimaru’s immense Bankai form glittered with reddish pink light, then slowly dissolved back into the weapon’s normal sleeping state. He returned it to its sheath, moving to kneel at Rukia’s side as he brushed her hair out of her face.

“I don’t think she’s badly hurt, just knocked out.” He reported, relief clear in his tones as he scooped her protectively up in his arms like a ragdoll, and at his words, Ichigo felt relief flood through him as well.

“It is a very good thing that that is the case.” Byakuya’s gaze flitted back towards Ukitake for a moment. Then he turned on his heel, sweeping away towards the 6-Bantai building without even pausing to check whether Renji was following him.

“I guess he’s still pissed.” Renji rolled his eyes. “I’d better do as he said. Rukia’ll be okay, Ichigo. Leave it to us an’ worry about Ishida, huh?”

“Yeah.” Ichigo agreed. “Thanks, Renji. Though when she wakes, tell her I’ll definitely speak t’her before we leave. Okay?”

“For sure.” Renji saluted him playfully with his free arm. Then he was gone, and Ichigo was left alone with Ukitake and his confused companion.

Once Byakuya was clearly out of earshot, Ichigo let out his breath in a rush.

“That was ugly.” He said frankly, and Ukitake glanced up, nodding his head.

“Potentially, but not everything should be solved with a clash of weapons.” He said with a rueful smile. “Thank you for staying out of it until things had calmed a little, Ichigo-kun. I realise it is a difficult situation for you as well.”

“I never saw Byakuya like that.” Ichigo admitted. “You must’ve known him a shit long time, Ukitake-san, t’be able to talk t’him like that without him running you through.”

“Oh, I remember when Byakuya was no more than a small tyke running around the Kuchiki estate, wielding a wooden sword and challenging the house staff to fight him at every opportunity.” Despite himself, a glimmer of amusement flickered in Ukitake’s dark brown eyes, and Ichigo smirked.

“For real?”

“Yes, indeed.” Ukitake looked nostalgic. “Quite a spirited young lad he was, too, to all intents and purposes. Well, there were shades of it in him today, on reflection. I probably shouldn’t have mentioned Hisana… but I had to do something to divert his attention away from the fight at hand.”

“Even if he’d turned Senbonzakura on you instead?” Ichigo looked mystified, and Ukitake shrugged.

“When you’ve been around long enough to see a fellow Captain as such a young boy, I suppose it’s hard to be frightened.” He said frankly. “You have to realise, Ichigo-kun, that I still remember the days I’d visit his Grandfather and find him at Ginrei’s heels, wrapped in a dusty towel to represent a mock *haori* and demanding candy right before it was time to eat.”

Ichigo’s eyes rounded, and Ukitake looked rueful.

“Perhaps that isn’t an image I should have shared with you.” He acknowledged. “He might be cross with me, if he knew I had, so keep it to yourself. But the truth is, Ginrei and I both knew even then, when he was no more than three or four, that he had the potential to be the most powerful Kuchiki-ke leader for generations. And he has become so, too. Byakuya is a tremendously strong Shinigami — definitely one of the strongest in the Gotei 13. I have never fought him, but there is always a possibility, given his high-born roots, that these days his abilities outpace the ones this weak, sickly old body possesses. But no, I’m not worried about him attacking me. He is not so reckless as that, I don’t think. Contrary to what you just saw… he and I have a fairly good understanding.”

“Rukia’s in 13-Bantai.” Comprehension flooded Ichigo’s features, and Ukitake nodded.

“Exactly.” He said lightly. “Because it was somewhere Byakuya felt was a suitable place for his sister to learn about Seireitei’s demands.”

“Where am I this time?” Uryuu put in at that moment, glancing around himself in wary confusion, and Ichigo smirked, shaking his head.

“Better you don’t ask.” He said frankly. “Trust me. You’d rather not know.”

“For the time being, I think it’s best we take him back to 13-Bantai’s quarters.” Ukitake reflected. “Since Byakuya’s washed his hands of the situation, I’ll take it over from here.”

He coughed, pausing a moment to catch his breath, and Ichigo cast

him a concerned look.

“Are you really all right?” He asked anxiously, and Ukitake nodded.

“It hasn’t killed me yet, and I don’t suppose it will any time soon.” He agreed lightly. “Thanks to Inoue-san’s unusual abilities, I think I’m probably better than I should be, in truth.”

“Inoue’s…” Ichigo stared at him, then, “You mean… Inoue used her power… so you could come and…?”

“She cares a good deal about her friends, that girl.” Ukitake nodded again, his expression softening as he glanced between the two young teenagers. “Well, just as you all do, I imagine. It’s good for an old man to see, that kind of loyalty forged so young.”

“I guess we’ve all been through a lot of shit together.” Ichigo reflected, and Ukitake smiled.

“That’s usually how the strongest bonds are formed.” He said wisely. “I’ve been a Captain a long time, and I’ve seen many many different people move in and out of power in Seireitei during that period. But the ones who make the biggest positive impact tend to be those who trust in and, in turn, can be trusted to do the right thing. You youngsters have solid foundations for that — and come the Winter, I feel, we’ll be relying on that fact more than we probably should.”

He glanced at the still dazed-Quincy.

“In the meantime, if Ishida-kun can stand, maybe if you support his other side we can get him somewhere he can rest?” He added. “Then I’ll send Kiyone or Sentarou for 4-Bantai…”

“I don’t need… healing.” Uryuu spoke up, shaking his head carefully as though it was still buzzing with the after-effects of the battle. “I’m just… tired. That’s all.”

“Then we’ll find a place for you to rest.” Ukitake assured him. “And then, with any luck, we can fully resolve things in the right way.”

“I fought again, didn’t I?” Uryuu glanced at his scuffed hands, and Ichigo nodded.

“Full pelt against Byakuya.” He agreed ruefully. “Not t’mention layin’ Rukia out cold on the ground. I’m almost sorry I didn’t get t’see you go Bankai — although I guess it was the right thing, for Ukitake-san to stop you when he did. Byakuya’d have cut you to ribbons, judgin’ by the mood he was in today.”

“I fought… against Byakuya-san?” Uryuu murmured faintly, and Ukitake laughed, resting a reassuring hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“*Shizuki* fought Byakuya. He knows that and so do I.” He said frankly. “Byakuya wouldn’t have raised his sword against you if you’d been yourself, I’m sure. But Ichigo-kun is probably right… Senbonzakura would probably have been too much for you — even with Shizuki’s *reiryoku* running through you. I don’t know that your soul is strong enough at present to be able to maintain a Captain’s Bankai — let’s be glad we didn’t have to find out.”

“I feel ragged enough.” Uryuu admitted. He frowned, casting his gaze in the direction of the blade that still lay discarded on the ground.

“I think it’s my own fault, though.” He added, reaching a hesitant hand out towards it. “For not listening when I should’ve done.”

“Hey, you don’t want to be playing with that.” Ichigo said hastily, moving to kick the weapon away, but Uryuu shook his head.

“Hassuiryou isn’t the one who made me act like that.” He said evenly, his pale fingers closing around the hilt of the weapon as he lifted it, running his hand over the blade. “He tried to warn me, but I really didn’t listen. And because I didn’t listen, I put people in danger. Kurosaki, is Inoue-san all right? And Kuchiki-san? I didn’t hurt her badly, did I?”

“Inoue’s fine. She’s already at 13-Bantai — that Kiyone girl took her there to keep her safe.” Ichigo shook his head. “And as for Rukia, she’s just unconscious, I think. It was the rest of us you were gunning for. Byakuya especially. You had it in for him.”

“Mm.” Uryuu tilted Hassuiryou’s hilt, watching as the sun glinted off the silver weapon.

“There’s been so much fuss about that sword.” Ichigo added. “Are you tellin’ me it had nothing to do with anything, after all?”

Uryuu shrugged.

“I suppose it depends.” He said thoughtfully. “Everything and nothing, probably. If nothing else, I think… I accepted a new reality, today.”

“Huh?” Ichigo was foxed, and Uryuu smiled faintly.

“It’s all right.” He responded. “You wouldn’t understand it, Kurosaki. Even if you tried.”

“If you can walk, Ishida-kun, let’s head back to 13-Bantai.” Ukitake suggested, and Uryuu frowned.

“There is one other thing, Ukitake-san.” He said quietly. “Someone gave me the sword and primed me to use it. Someone wanted me to fight Byakuya-san. My memories are pretty fuzzy, and although I don’t know why, I’ve a pretty good idea who.”

“For the time being, that matter can rest… and so must you.” Ukitake said firmly. “There will be plenty of time tomorrow for that.”

“But…”

“Right now, you don’t look fit to fight with your shadow.” Ichigo said frankly. “Ukitake-san’s right. Give in a little, will you?”

Uryuu sighed heavily.

“All right.” He said reluctantly. “I suppose you’re right. I suppose… tomorrow is as good as today.”

So the Quincy was all right, after all.

Nemu quelled the disloyal feeling of relief that stirred inside of her at this realisation, her gaze focused intently on her master’s study subject as, with Ukitake on one side and his spiky haired companion on the other, he prepared to leave 6-Bantai.

Whether Kurotsuchi would be pleased or disappointed with the outcome, Nemu didn’t know. Yet even though she felt certain any sense of failure would be taken out on her, she didn’t mind. The Quincy was all right. That was more important.

She allowed a faint smile to touch her lips, turning on her heel and making her way slowly back towards her home barracks. They had not noticed her during the battle, she knew, for she had kept her own reiatsu closely concealed as she had watched from her hidden vantage point every stroke that both fighters had made in their short-lived, heated confrontation. She had observed many things, several of which she would dutifully relate in exact, pedantic detail to her Master on her return to the lab.

And yet there were a few things that she would not.

I’m glad you’re alive, Quincy-san. Even though I’ve only helped Mayuri-sama in his attempts to study you, you’ve still always spoken to me in kindness. I’m sorry that I helped to take your friend prisoner, and I’m sorry that you had to get hurt. But I hoped that you’d be strong enough. And in

the end, you were.
She sighed, reflecting on the battle once more as she reached the entrance to 12-Bantai.

Likely that will make Mayuri-sama happy, too, since it means he can continue to watch over you. In which case, I have no reason to complain. Mayuri-sama gets easily bored with projects when they don't make progress, after all. Thank you, Quincy-san… for being one of the ones that did.

"Nemu!"

At the sound of Kurotsuchi's imperious tones, the Vice Captain was brought back to reality, and she stepped through the gate, raising her gaze to meet her master's quizzical look with an impassive one of her own.

"You took your time. I sensed the fall in reiatsu a good few minutes ago." Kurotsuchi was impatient, but even though annoyance burned in his cold amber eyes, Nemu found that she didn't mind.

"My sincere apologies, Mayuri-sama." She said contritely, bowing her head. "I have come to report to you now."

"Then stop with the theatrical formalities and spit it out, woman!" Kurotsuchi demanded, reaching out to grasp hold of her long braid of hair and giving it a warning tug. "Or do I have to rip the data from your memory by force?"

"The Quincy is alive, Mayuri-sama." Nemu did not even flinch, meeting the malicious golden glare with a calm dark one of her own. "He released the blade, just as you expected. He was able to attack with it, and he caused considerable damage to the outside façade of 6-Bantai's buildings."

"I know that, you idiot girl. I felt as much from here." Kurotsuchi said frankly. "Kuchiki Byakuya released his sword too, didn't he? Well? How would you say my project measured up?"

Nemu was silent for a moment, considering once again the struggles between Shizuki's manipulated spirit and his glittering *zanpakutou* to retain sanity and control.

"I think Shizuki Ametatsu is like the Quincy who now has possession of the soul." She said softly. "He doesn't like to kill, Mayuri-sama."

"What kind of an answer is that?" Kurotsuchi stared at her strangely, and Nemu managed a slight smile.

“Ukitake-taichou prevented Kuchiki-taichou from releasing his Bankai.” She continued levelly. “And so the Quincy did not attempt to release his, either.”

“Ukitake.” Kurotsuchi’s expression became angry and he released his hold on Nemu’s hair, clenching his clawed fists together in his frustration. “I knew that he was far too interested in spirit particles of late. Damn him! And when I was so close to finding out the true limits on a reconstituted soul’s power! But still, even so, I should have some quite considerable data to analyse, what with the bacteria flowing through his system and your recollections, Nemu. And he’s still alive, you said? Perhaps that is best. I have very little interest in Quincy corpses.”

He gestured towards the laboratory.

“Follow me.” He instructed. “I’ll see for myself just what you observed, if you don’t mind… and if Ukitake is involved now, I will have to do so quickly, so I can archive any useful data into the computer banks before he puts all the pieces together and arrives at my door.”

“Yes, Mayuri-sama.” Nemu bowed her head in acknowledgement of his orders, and Kurotsuchi tut-tutted under his breath.

“That old fool interferes in my business far more often than I’d like.” He muttered. “Sometimes I really wish I could start a study into spectral tuberculosis… that would, surely, be enough to distract him away from my other concerns.”

Inwardly Nemu said a silent ‘thank you’ to the 13-Bantai Captain for his interference, glad that in that moment at least her master could not read her thoughts.

Somehow it makes me feel a little relieved, that it ended up this way.

“Well? Why are you dragging your feet? You heard me, didn’t you?” Kurotsuchi snapped, clicking his fingers in front of her face and making her jump. “We have work to do! I won’t tell you again — follow me!”

The flickering reiatsu on the horizon had dampened down, now.

Kira got to his feet, crossing the small recovery chamber that had been his home for the past forty eight hours, casting a glance at his reflection in the long mirror as he did so. Although he was still pale, he was much recovered, and had been ready to leave the 4-Bantai building some hours earlier, but his sharp wits had quickly picked up

Senbonzakura's rising aura, and he had decided it safer to stay put until things had settled. Instead he had used the time in the way which came most naturally to him — in compiling into written form every detail of what had happened in 3-Bantai, down to the last word.

He had not recognised the other reiatsu, though he had greatly suspected that it had had some connection with the ryoka Quincy boy and the stolen sword, and he pursed his lips, wondering what the outcome had been and whether he would get a scolding after all for having allowed Hassuiryou to fall into the wrong hands.

By now, he knew, the sun was beginning to set over Soul Society, and he wondered absently how his squad had managed in his absence. Though he was not arrogant enough to believe they had flailed without him, he knew that there was a part of him that would be glad to get back to routine. So much had, after all, been uncertain since Ichimaru's departure. Yet for the first time, Kira felt more ready to face those ghosts and tackle his position as 3-Bantai Vice Captain head on.

So long, of course, as that did not involve facing an angry Kuchiki-taichou with a released *zanpakutou* in hand.

"So, they're letting you back amongst the living, are they?"

As he adjusted the sash on his *hakama*, Kira paused at the sound of the voice, glancing up in surprise to meet the quizzical gaze of his old Academy friend. He smiled, nodding his head as he did so.

"Yes, something like that." He agreed amiably. "Why are you here, though, Abarai-kun? Don't tell me you were worrying about me?"

"Are you kidding?" Renji snorted. "Who'd worry about an idiot like you? You go and get yourself gassed, well, you deserve what you get, after all."

Kira's blue eyes glittered with amusement, not at all fooled by his friend's bravado.

"Well, I'm tougher than I look, it seems." He said matter-of-factly. "I feel all right now. A little sluggish, maybe… but more than well enough to go back to my office and deal with 3-Bantai's administration. So that's where I'm going. My squad's been abandoned long enough as it is, after all."

"You really mean that, don't you?" Renji frowned, eying his companion keenly, and Kira nodded.

"I'm not Captain material, but I'm the only person they have at the

moment." He said pragmatically, reaching across to scoop up the sleeping Wabisuke from its place on the unit next to the bed. "And I suppose having me is probably better than not having anyone, so the sooner I go back the better."

"Optimistic as ever." Renji smirked. "What about what happened? You ain't worried it'll happen again?"

Kira's expression became thoughtful, and he slowly shook his head.

"They took what they wanted." He murmured. "They won't come back."

"You almost sound like you remember what happened."

Kira nodded.

"I do." He admitted. "It was blurry and hazy for a while, but the more I thought on it, the more I was able to piece together. I have a good memory after all, Abarai-kun. I notice details — you know that, because you're always ribbing me for fixating on them. But this time I think… it's proven to be a good thing. Because I remember quite clearly now, everything that happened up until the moment I blacked out."

"Everything?" Renji's eyes lit up, and Kira nodded again.

"I guess so. Pretty much, anyhow." He agreed, scooping up the tied paper report and glancing at it as he did so. "In truth, I was going to leave here earlier and go and report what I remembered to Kuchiki-taichou — after all, he did say it was my next assignment, so I thought that he should know. Bu-u-ut then I felt Senbonzakura's reiatsu and I figured there was something going on I really didn't want to be a part of. So I decided to wait here until the fuss died down, and I wrote everything down while I was waiting instead."

"Sheesh, you really are a wimp sometimes, you know that?" Renji shook his head in disbelief, and Kira looked rueful.

"Yes." He said honestly. "But sometimes that can be a good thing. Call it a survival skill, if you like. I wouldn't stand a chance against a sword like Senbonzakura. Or any Captain's, to be fair. Heck, even against you, Abarai-kun, these days. I don't have that kind of strength to call on, so there's no sense rushing into a fight I can't win. And submitting a report in writing is easier, anyhow. That way you know everything you need to say has been said, without needing to find the courage to say it out loud."

"I guess that's where you and I are different, huh." Renji lounged

back against the wall, and Kira's expression became serious.

"Yes and no." He murmured. "See, in the vault… things were said and… well, it made me think, to be honest with you. I'm not 3-Bantai's Captain, but their safety is still my responsibility. Despite that, though, I wasn't strong enough to defend them. They were attacked and hurt because of that fact. Even though Kuchiki-taichou said I wasn't to blame — there should've been something I could've done. Only I didn't do it."

He sighed.

"To be honest, I didn't even draw Wabisuke from its sheath." He owned. "Even though part of me wanted to — I guess I'm still conditioned not to pull my sword on someone who ranks more highly than I do. No matter what it is they're involved in doing. You'd think I'd have learnt that lesson from Ichimaru-taichou — but I guess old habits really do die hard. That's probably why, in the end, I wrote it as a report. I don't think I could stand before Captain class Shinigami and tell tales… but if it's in ink, I can detach myself from it more easily, and worry instead about being objective and clear."

"So the one who broke into 3-Bantai and laid you all flat *was* that jerk Kurotsuchi after all, huh?" Renji mused, and Kira stared at him in surprise.

"You already knew that?"

"Strong suspicion, shall we say." Renji grinned. "Who else uses toxic gas to knock people out? It had his MO stamped all over it."

"But even if I had drawn Wabisuke, he would have easily killed me." Kira said regretfully. "I'm not strong enough, even if I release my sword, to win that kind of a fight."

"It ain't like it matters, now. We know he was behind it, an' that's more important. You can't kick yourself about this one too, Kira. You ain't to blame for everythin' shit that happens in 3-Bantai, you know."

"Perhaps not." Kira's acknowledged. "But I should be able to be more decisive. In a situation like that… Abarai-kun, Kurotsuchi-taichou said things about me which… which were true, I suppose, although they hurt when he said them. And some of my squad — they defended me. But I don't feel like I deserved to be defended. I couldn't stop them from getting attacked. I couldn't keep the sword safe. So… while I was thinking all that over… I came to a decision."

"Which is?"

“I need to get stronger. Whatever that means, I need to do it.”

“Well, no brainer there.” Renji snorted, clapping his hand down on his friend’s shoulder. “I’ve been telling you that for years, you idiot. C’mon, huh? We’re goin’ for a little walk — there’s someone who oughta hear all of your memories while you still got them fresh in your mind.”

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully, as he shot the fair-haired Shinigami a sidelong glance.

“Unless you want to say goodbye to Hinamori, before you leave…?”

“Abarai-kun!” Despite himself, Kira flushed red with embarrassment, shaking his head. “Don’t be stupid! Besides… I’m on duty now, aren’t I? Don’t suggest silly things — I’m not going to hang around here when I’ve got work to do!”

“Mmhm.” Renji eyed him pensively. “So you already said goodbye to her, then — is that it?”

“*Abarai-kun*!”

“Well…?”

Kira sighed, glancing at his hands.

“This morning, before you came.” He admitted hesitantly. “Though it wasn’t ‘goodbye’ exactly. I just wanted someone to talk out what I’d been thinking over… and I didn’t want to talk it out with myself. Hinamori-kun is a good listener… that’s all it was.”

“Damn right she’s a good listener, since she’s friggin’ comatose.” Renji sighed, rolling his eyes heavenwards. “I hope for her sake the poor girl can’t hear what’s goin’ on in that dream-state o’hers. God knows what drivel she’s been forced to sit through otherwise… between you an’ everyone else who’s been fussin’ over her.”

“It’s not like that.” Kira shook his head, his cheeks still an uncomfortable red as he met his friend’s gaze. “I wouldn’t ever compromise our friendship by talking… like that. But I realised that I wasn’t strong enough to protect her, either… not when she needed me to. So it was another reason I wanted to be stronger. I won’t let her get hurt again, if I can prevent it. It’s not a nice feeling, seeing her like that and knowing how much I had to do with it. So.”

“I didn’t realise you were the one holdin’ Aizen’s blade, Kira.”

“I didn’t mean like that.” Kira shook his head, even as the two Shinigami left the small ward room, heading out across 4-Bantai’s

courtyard towards the entrance gate. “Just… I didn’t do anything to prevent it. Because of that… it’s as much my fault as it is his.”

“Whatever.” Renji grimaced. “You’re feeling sorry for yourself again, and I’m not going to waste breath trying to talk it out of you.”

“It’s not that.” Kira reflected. “But I am serious, Abarai-kun. Even though I’ve known it for a while. The thing is, Ichimaru-taichou never gave me an opportunity to be strong. He led, he gave me the chance to follow — and I just fell into that pattern without questioning it. But I didn’t learn anything except how not to make decisions for myself. And the truth is… the truth is I didn’t want to get much stronger. I didn’t want to release Wabisuke more than I already had.”

“Why the hell not?” Renji looked blank. “Wabisuke’s a kickass *zanpakutou*. Why wouldn’t you want to take it to its limits?”

Kira sighed.

“A *zanpakutou* comes from a Shinigami’s soul.” He said softly, running his finger absently along Wabisuke’s hilt as he did so. “But Wabisuke’s power is dark and depressing, when it comes to the final analysis. When I release him, his power knocks people to their knees. You know as well as I do what the final outcome is meant to be — what kind of a blade Wabisuke is. The thing is, though, he comes from inside of me. And that darkness and depression… is also a part of me. It must be. And the more I work with Wabisuke, the more of that I’m drawing out of myself. If I strive to make our bond stronger… I strive to make myself darker. And… and the truth is that I hate Wabisuke for those things, Abarai-kun. I hate him… as much as I hate those parts inside of me. I don’t think I’m someone who… who wants to fight if there’s another way to do it. But I have to fight. So… I have to face that darkness somehow and deal with it head on.”

“You really, truly do think way too much about shit, you know that?” Renji groaned. “Don’t be so damn stupid. Wabisuke’s your sword. You take it, you fight with it, you develop it the way you want t’fight with it. You’re in control of it, not the other way around. You’re not that much of a hopeless case, Kira. So don’t pretend that you are. Wabisuke ain’t nothin’ to do with it. If you’re feelin’ dark an’ gloomy, it’s all on you. Not your sword.”

“It’s much the same thing, in the end.” Kira admitted. “Wabisuke’s nature, my nature. Just like Zabimaru fights and fights and doesn’t go down easily, Abarai-kun. He’s just like you in that regard. Wabisuke is my curse as well as my weapon. That’s how it’s been since the start. After all, 3-Bantai’s motif is the marigold. The flower of despair. It’s

just the way things are."

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Yes, but even though I'm glad you're on my side, I know that you're wrong." Kira said matter-of-factly. "But it's all right. I've made my mind up, now. 3-Bantai has noone else. We were abandoned by our Captain and left to rot. We're open to all kinds of dangers unless I get my act together and do the things I've never done. I could run away, but I don't want to. Whatever the reasons, 3-Bantai is *my* squad now and that's where I mean to stick it out, no matter how tough it gets to do so. Even if I'm afraid of Wabisuke, or of the things he might be able to do. I'm still going to work at developing them… and him. Just… Abarai-kun, if I go too deep… don't let me take it to extremes, all right? If I push it too far… I don't know if I'll be able to go back."

"Shit, melodrama much." Renji sighed, holding up his hands. "Fine. Whatever. You do what you gotta do with Wabisuke an' I'll back you up when you need me to. Hell, I'll get Zabimaru t'chew on you if you get too depressing, okay? Now forget about that and focus on what happened beneath your squad buildings the other night. He's not goin' to get away with it, after all. Even if, in the end, noone did get killed."

"But… are we not going to see Kuchiki-taichou?" As the two men passed 6-Bantai's gateway, Kira hesitated, casting his friend a quizzical glance. "I thought…"

"Taichou's havin' a hissy fit an' has washed his hands of the whole business." Renji shook his head. "We're goin' to see Ukitake-taichou. The Quincy boy's there, an' so are Ichigo an' Inoue."

"But… aren't you going against your Captain then, if you're still involved in this?"

"Not really. Taichou never said I couldn't speak to you about what happened, or that I couldn't talk t'Ukitake-taichou about Kurotsuchi-taichou." Renji said airily. "I'm not disobeyin' orders if I ain't been given them… am I?"

Kira blinked, staring at his friend for a moment, and Renji laughed.

"With a Captain like mine, Kira, sometimes the orders that ain't said are as important as the ones that are." He said frankly. "An' it pays to take note of it, word for word. I ain't gonna rebel against Kuchiki-taichou again any time soon. But that doesn't mean that I'm not able t'make my own decisions, too. If he doesn't like it, well, he should give me clearer orders. As it is… right now I've got somethin' important t'settle first. Kurotsuchi's games wound up knockin' out one

of my buddies, an' puttin' Rukia in danger. For that reason, I ain't steppin' back an' letting him get away with it."

A faint smile touched Kira's lips at this.

"See, that's the kind of thing you'd never see me doing." He said ruefully. "I'd be too afraid of how the Captain would react."

"Ah, but right now you don't *have* a Captain to react." Renji's eyes glittered with amusement. "So there's no problem. You're not disobeying anyone, after all. You're just investigatin' what happened to your squad. Aren't you? Besides, Ishida has the *zanpakutou* that was swiped. Isn't it part of your brief to find that an' return it to the Sou Taichou's hands?"

"Is it dangerous, him having it?" Kira looked apprehensive, and Renji shrugged.

"Dunno." He admitted. "It was pretty dangerous when he went hell for leather against the Taichou this afternoon. But Ukitake-taichou seemed t'be able to calm things so… I guess not. So long as the old guy's there, it should be fine."

"Maybe he'll want to keep it, then."

"Ishida?" Renji shook his head. "Nah. He's a Quincy, not a Shinigami. He's done nothing but moan about the transformation since he got here. If y'ask me, he'll be only to glad to get rid of it an' get back to normal. An' then you can take it to the Sou Taichou an' give it to him yourself. Right? Case closed."

"And 3-Bantai's duty fully discharged." Kira murmured. "When you put it that way, I suppose you have a point."

"Of course I do." Renji said frankly. "You may be the bookworm, Kira, but I ain't stupid, you know."

"I'm not going to argue with a Vice Captain who's mastered Bankai." Kira laughed, holding up his hands in mock-surrender. "It's all right, Abarai-kun. I'll take your word for it."

Renji grinned.

"Good choice." He said evenly, as they reached the distinctive entrance to the thirteenth and final of the Gotei squad bases. "An' here we are. Be sure you got a tight hold on that report of yours, Kira… we're about to compare notes an' find a way t'flush that sadistic nutjob out from his roost!"

Author's Note:

My sincerest apologies to Kubo-sensei and the Kuchiki-ke for the artistic licence, but I find the idea of a chibi Byakuya trying to be a Captain like his Grandpa at age three or four the most endearing thing ever. I swear, if I could draw, that would be one of the first things I'd draw :S Plus who can't see Ukitake giving him candy in those circumstances??

For more Candy-Byakkun-Towel-haori-randomness, see my omake oneshot Halcyon Days*.*

Ukitake kicks so much ass. Seriously.

Chapter Twenty Five: In Memoriam

Chapter Twenty Five: In Memoriam

Ametatsu hurried through the streets of Seireitei, his breath coming in ever-more ragged gasps. Behind him he could feel the flickering reiatsu of his pursuers, and he swallowed hard, tears blurring his vision as he made for the one place which he had always felt safe.

As he rounded the corner, the reassuring black on white of the 13-Bantai squad building loomed ahead of him and he charged towards it, ignoring the exclamations of the startled squad Shinigami that blocked his path.

"Shizuki… taichou?" One of them called his name and for a moment he faltered, fingers hovering over the hilt of Hassuiryou as for a split second his frantic brain instructed him to draw his weapon.

"Stop him! Someone, surround him!" The voice of the squad's third seat rang out, and despite their confusion, several of the others pulled their weapons from their sheaths, advancing on Ametatsu with clear apprehension in their gazes.

Panic seared in Ametatsu's heart as he realised that Hell Butterflies had been here before him, and that the word had spread even so far as this of events in the Real World. He pulled Hassuiryou from its scabbard, waving it menacingly in the direction of the advancing juniors as the edges began to shimmer and ripple like raindrops falling against a glass window

"Stay away from me!" He exclaimed, fear and anger mingling in his eyes. "Stay back, or I'll slit your throats too! I want to see the Captain! I want to see Ukitake-taichou!"

"Stand back, you bastard!" 13-Bantai's third seat pushed to the front of the fray, his own sabre-like weapon drawn before him as he faced the near-hysterical Captain down. "We know what you did to Shihouin-taichou, in the Real World. We know about it all. Do you think we're going to stand back an' let you do the same to our Captain? Not a chance. You want to fight? I'll be your opponent."

"Do you want me to kill you too?" Hassuiryou's blade glittered with shards of light as Shizuki threw caution to the wind, preparing to release his weapon at it's fullest level, and clouds began to gather overhead, at first just vague wisps but in a matter of seconds dark enough to be true storm clouds, loaded as they were with rain-like shards of polished metal. "A kid

who hasn't even mastered Bankai yet? Don't be stupid. I want Ukitake. Ukitake, do you hear me? I'll kill anyone who gets in my way — step back before I kill you all too!"

"I already told you, you're not going to hurt the Captain!" The third seat stood his ground, and Shizuki's eyes narrowed, his grip tightening on the weapon in his hand. As he shifted his pose, several of the juniors who had served under him took a step back, and an anxious whisper began to slip between them as they realised the seriousness of his intentions.

"He's going to release the rain dragon." One man hissed fearfully to his companion. "He's goin' to go into friggin' Bankai — we're all goin' to be drowned if we stay here!"

"Stand firm and defend the Captain." The third seat said frankly. "This squad ain't a place for cowards."

He glared at Ametatsu coldly.

"That it would come to this, Shizuki-taichou." He murmured. "When so many people in Soul Society thought such a damn lot of you, too. Do you realise how much shit you've brought on us all? You're from Rukongai — like me, like others among us. Now people're goin' to think that Rukongai kids make unstable captains. That we're not good enough, after all, for the top ranks of office. That we go around goddamn slayin' other Captains, dammit! What the hell do you think you were doing?"

"Step aside." Shizuki's eyes glittered with reckless rage. "Before I show you the full might of Hassuiryou's power."

He raised the sword high above his head, the tip of the sleek, long blade glowing with a bright golden light as he drew on the remaining scraps of his shattered reiatsu. Before he could release it fully, however, the door of the squad building slid back, and the familiar form of the 13-Bantai captain stepped out into the melee.

At the sight of their superior officer, the scattered Shinigami seemed to gain their wits, and Ametatsu froze, raising his gaze to meet the confused brown eyes of the man who had trained him.

"What's this all about, Shizuki?" The voice was calm and reassuring, just as it had always been, and to the wrenched Ametatsu it was the last straw that broke his composure. With a stifled sob he sank to his knees, releasing his grip on Hassuiryou which dropped to the floor with a harmless clatter. In an instant, the squad members surrounded him, but Ukitake held up his hands, gesturing for them to step aside.

"What have you done, boy?" He asked softly, and Ametatsu raised his gaze to the man he had looked up to for so long, unable to form words as

he interpreted the concern in the older man's eyes.

He swallowed hard, tears still streaming down his cheeks, and Ukitake sighed, bending to pick up the discarded blade.

"I think we should talk." He murmured, and at this, the third seat let out a surprised exclamation.

"But… Taichou, you heard the message! You heard… what he did… in the Real World?"

"Yes, Kuraki. I heard."

"Shouldn't we be locking him in a cell, then? And sending to the Sou Taichou…?"

"I will speak to Yamamoto Sou Taichou myself, once I have established exactly what happened between Shizuki and Shihouin-taichou." Ukitake gestured to Ametatsu to get to his feet. "You needn't look so anxious, Kuraki. I am a Captain too, after all. I trained him, and I know his strengths and his weaknesses. He will not get the better of me — and I cannot simply lock away someone who looks at me with a face like this."

"But Taichou…"

"That was an order, Kuraki." Ukitake did not raise his voice, but Kuraki faltered, then bowed his head in acknowledgement of his Captain's commands.

"Yes, sir."

"When the members of 2-Bantai arrive, tell them that I have taken Shizuki into my custody, and that I will be handling the matter directly with the Sou Taichou." Ukitake continued, even as Ametatsu got shakily to his feet. "Tell them that this instruction is absolute, and that in the absence of their own Captain, I will ensure that everything is done according to procedure. Also, send someone to 10-Bantai's quarters. Ensure they know that their Captain is in our custody — and that they should not attempt to either rescue or appropriate him until I have spoken to the Sou Taichou and established what we are supposed to do."

He cast the pitiful Captain a glance, then,

"I do not think he intends to fight with me." He added simply. "I believe it will be quite all right for us to just talk."

With that, the members of the squad melted back into the shadows, Kuraki hesitating for a moment, then following suit as he barked out instructions for one of the smallest and weakest members of the group to run to 10-Bantai's offices. Thus left alone, Ametatsu swallowed hard,

staring at Ukitake in confusion.

"You… want to talk to me?" At length he found the words. Ukitake nodded, taking his former Vice Captain by the arm and leading him carefully inside the Squad building and further into the Captain's office. Once there, he ushered the shaken man into an empty seat, taking his own with a heavy sigh. It was in that instant that Ametatsu registered that beneath the white haori *his former Captain was dressed in loose robes, rather than his usual black* hakama. *With a jolt he realised that Ukitake was once more in poor health, and that, in fact, he had been in the midst of one of his frequent attacks.*

"The Hell Butterflies brought the word from Kuchiki Ginrei about what happened in the Real World." Ukitake spoke quietly, his words faintly hoarse yet somehow soothing to Ametatsu's wrenched spirits. "But I'd like to hear it from you, if you're able to tell me. Why did you come here, of all places, Shizuki? Your haori*'s stained with blood, and you're half out of your wits. Why come here, of all places, when you could so easily have fled?"*

Ametatsu swallowed hard, reaching up to brush away his tears.

"I didn't come here to attack you." He said unevenly. "I wouldn't turn Hassuiryou on you, Taichou, no matter what happens. You know that, don't you? You taught me everything… I owe you too much. No matter what… I wouldn't turn Hassuiryou's blade against you."

"I know that." Ukitake sat back in his seat. "But even so, I don't believe Kuchiki's words to be falsehoods. You did turn your blade against one Captain, didn't you? Against Shihouin Hirohito, in the Real World."

Ametatsu dropped his gaze, his body still shaking with the force of his emotion.

"I did." He said flatly. "I fought him and I killed him, just as you heard."

"Why would you do something so reckless as that?" Ukitake asked gently. "Shihouin was your ally. Why did you turn on him in such a way?"

Ametatsu's lips trembled as he forced himself to voice the word.

"N… Niji."

"Niji?" Ukitake looked bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"Ishida Niji was a Quincy. A Quincy who believed in peace between us and them." Ametatsu's tears welled once more in his eyes as he relived the stabbing, agonising pain he had felt as he had cradled her dying body in his arms. "She believed in us — trusted us — yet because she was a Quincy,

she was killed."

His eyes narrowed.

"Shihouin-taichou was the one who gave the order." He muttered. "His special forces acted without taking into account all of Central 46's instructions. He had them indiscriminately murdered, Taichou. No matter what their intentions or their thoughts. He decided it would be better to kill them all."

Ukitake looked surprised, then he sighed.

"I see." He said heavily. "So Shihouin decided, did he, that all of the Quincy posed a threat to us and the balance of the two worlds we protect?"

"He decided it. He did, not the tribunal." Ametatsu's eyes glittered with anger once more. "He said it — that they were all potentially destroyers in disguise — that their clan was nothing more than an aberration and that it should be removed. So he ordered his people to move. And they did."

"I heard a report, however, that the Quincy had launched a full scale rebellion against the tribunal, and had attacked several Hollows in a short space of time, drawing them into the town using their unique skills and creating trouble not only there but also here." Ukitake said gravely. "Districts in Rukongai have suffered badly throughout this — as a Rukongai boy, Shizuki, I would've thought you'd be worried about that."

"But not all of the Quincy were involved in that." Ametatsu raised his hopeless gaze to his former mentor's. "Ukitake-taichou, the Ishida clan were on our side. They kept out of it and didn't join in when the others were sending bait up into the atmosphere and drawing the Hollows in. They submitted their weapons to us in good faith because they believed…"

He swallowed hard, as his voice threatened to give way to his emotion, and Ukitake did not speak, giving him time to compose himself.

"They… some of them… were even hurt because of it." He continued slowly. "And they came to us for… for… for help. But instead of helping them, Shihouin-taichou…"

He faltered, unable to go any further, and Ukitake's gaze clouded.

"I see." He murmured. "Shihouin decided it was a good opportunity to carry out Central 46's command, and decided not to discriminate between clans who were revolting and those who were not. Correct?"

"Yes."

Ametatsu's response was no more than a whisper, and Ukitake rubbed his temples, looking tired.

"And this Niji girl…?"

Ametatsu swallowed hard, and Ukitake sighed.

"You loved her, didn't you?" He asked quietly, and Ametatsu slowly nodded his head.

"So you took it into your own hands, because of that, to turn on Shihouin and attack him?"

Ametatsu nodded again.

Ukitake frowned.

"You do realise that this can't just go by the wayside." He said sadly. "If you'd reported it to Seireitei — even if you'd consulted Kuchiki and asked for his help… that might have changed things. But as things stand…"

"I didn't want to involve Kuchiki-taichou." Ametatsu said unsteadily. "He didn't want to kill the Quincy except by the orders Central 46 set down — he wasn't involved in the massacre. It was the Special Operations Forces, and Shihouin-taichou that took things into their own hands. It was only them… only them… for Niji's sake…"

He closed his eyes.

"Central 46 said there would be harsh penalties on the souls of those who contravened Soul Society's rules and were executed accordingly." He whispered. "Niji was… she shouldn't have been… and even now, she's still… because of Shihouin-taichou and his stuck up ideas of what was right and wrong!"

"I don't believe I have ever seen you in such a state." Ukitake observed gravely, and Ametatsu sighed, drawing a shuddery breath into his body as he fought to calm himself down.

"I don't think I've ever felt so many things all at once." He murmured. "I know what I've done. I know that it's unforgivable to have done it… even though the fight was even and fair and he fought to take my life as much as I did his. I knew that when I did it, Taichou. There's no excusing it… I knew I was going to kill him before I did."

Ukitake frowned, shaking his head.

"Saying such things will not help you now." He said softly. "Telling Central 46 that you knowingly slit the throat of a senior Captain of long standing… or that you took the law into your own hands quite deliberately — Shizuki, such things…"

"I know." Ametatsu nodded. "But either way, it's the truth."

He smiled sadly, tears still glittering on his lashes.

"Niji would have been so cross, if she'd known what I'd done." He added regretfully. "She would never have asked me to kill in her name. But I had to do it, Taichou. It was my vengeance to take. Whatever happens now. I'm not proud of what I did — I know that I betrayed every value instilled in me when I took the haori. *I've let down and shamed 10-Bantai and I've no doubt disappointed you, too. You didn't train me to act like that, after all. But even so… even so…"*

"You felt you had no choice?"

"No… I made *the choice." Ametatsu shook his head. "It's no use, Taichou. You can't find a way to shield me — I didn't come here for that reason, in any case. I don't want to get you involved in my mess. It's not like that at all. But…"*

He faltered, and Ukitake frowned, rubbing his temples.

"Representatives of the Sou Taichou will be here shortly, I have no doubt." He said slowly. "If all those things are true, why ***did*** *you come to me, Shizuki? In these circumstances, knowing and freely admitting what you've done… and against one of the noble clans…"*

Ametatsu bit his lip, then,

"I will be executed." He said softly, as a sudden sense of calm and resignation overtook his battle-weary body. "And it's all right, Taichou. I don't care about that. If Shihouin had killed me, so be it. I went at him recklessly, true, but deliberately. In the end I killed him because I didn't care if he took me down. I came back here because I have nowhere else to go, and no purpose in being in the Real World now Niji is gone. It hurts. It hurts more than anything else… I didn't come back here to escape. I know that if you cross one of the great noble clans, there is no escape. Besides, what I've done is already unredeemable. I didn't come looking for Soul Society's mercy. I came back here to die."

He smiled sadly.

"But I wanted to see you first." He murmured. "You trained me. I felt… I at least owed you… an apology for letting you down."

"Shizuki…"

"That's all I came to say." Ametatsu got slowly to his feet. "We won't speak again, and I won't stay here any longer. People will think you're complicit in my crimes, if I do — I won't let that happen, either."

"Wait, where are you going?" Ukitake was alert immediately, but Ametatsu was too quick, scooping up the hilt of his abandoned sword and

sliding it back into its normal resting place at his right side.

"To see the Sou Taichou, just like you said." He said simply. "I can't walk away from this. I won't, either. I'm going to see him — and do what I have to do."

"Shizuki, hang on!" Ukitake's expression became one of alarm, but as he tried to grab his companion, he stumbled, dropping to the floor as his thin frame was wracked by a violent fit of coughing.

"I'm sorry to have come when you were unwell, but I'm glad it means you can't stop me." Ametatsu's gaze was melancholy as he looked back at the man with whom he had had so many years happy training. "I'm sorry, Taichou. Please, don't judge all of Rukongai's people by me. I'm sure there are others, after all, who'll be much better Captains one day than I've been."

With that he was gone, slipping into shunpo as he set his sights on the 1-Bantai headquarters. Behind him, he could feel the flickers of Ukitake's fluctuating reiatsu, and he knew that his former Captain, despite his poor health, was struggling to follow.

But it was too late. Ametatsu's hand closed purposefully around the hilt of his sword, as he reached his destination, preparing himself for what he was going to do.

"To end this, here and now." He muttered, pulling the torn, blood-stained haori *from off his back and tossing it with disdain into one of the many furnaces that marked the entrance to the Captain's Chamber within. For a moment he watched it burn, as the flames licked high against the white fabric, slowly obscuring the distinctive black cross that marked out his squad number as it did so.*

"I'm sorry, Niji. I couldn't protect you. But I did what I had to do, and I can't go back. It's over for both of us, now. This is the end… it's time to face my justice."

Uryuu opened his eyes, letting out a heavy sigh as he gazed out across the landscape beyond 13-Bantai. The vivid nature of Shizuki's memory and emotions still lingered in his brain, but this time he did not find himself afraid of them. On the contrary, for the first time, he began to feel a connection to this strange ghost who had been haunting his life for the past few weeks. Instead of anger and frustration, he felt only a sense of great sadness.

The dragon had tried to tell him, after all, about the way Ametatsu had felt that day. Yet Uryuu knew that he had deliberately not wanted to listen. Instead of embracing the severed aspects of his soul's past,

he had fought to keep up his barriers… and had almost paid the same price as his predecessor.

“Byakuya-san would have killed me, and I wouldn’t have blamed him.” He reflected. “I don’t remember most of the battle — just fleeting emotions and sensations — but I can tell by the way my body feels now that I was lucky Ukitake-san came to my rescue when he did. More, that he prevented me from doing anything else I might regret. I hurt Kuchiki-san, after all. I could’ve hurt more than that. And I could have lost my life. All because I didn’t listen to the warnings… I almost repeated history. Kurotsuchi may have manipulated me — but I *let* him. If I’d really been strong enough… it wouldn’t have happened that way.”

He turned on his heel, heading slowly across the planking towards the small chamber where he knew the blue-guarded sword had been shut away. Since they had come to 13-Bantai, everything had seemed to fall into a confusing sort of normality. Ukitake had not insisted on the weapon being sealed or locked in the chamber, nor had he instructed Uryuu to keep away from it, and for this fact the Quincy had been strangely grateful. In fact, when Uryuu had asked to keep guard over the weapon himself until matters could be properly settled in the morning, Ukitake had readily agreed.

“Perhaps you can learn from each other, after all.” He had said, in such a way that Uryuu knew that the old squad Captain understood far better the fluctuating connection between them. “And in the end, I’m sure that’s what Shizuki would have hoped for, too.”

Although Ichigo and Orihime had both expressed concern about him being in proximity to it, Uryuu himself had no fear. In the confrontation with Byakuya, and Ukitake’s subsequent interference, a bridge had been formed between him and the confused psyche of the dead Captain who had once been in command of his soul. And somehow Uryuu knew that, come what may, he would not lose control again.

After all, it had all been in his hands. It had always been that way. *His* soul, *his* power, *his* strength. His decisions that had guided the battle forward or backwards. The sword had never been the dangerous one — it had only been a tool in the hands of one too stubborn to learn how to hold it. The true danger had been inside of him — his own doubts, his own resentments, and most of all, his own refusal to listen to advice. And now that he had a chance to reflect on it, processing it in his meticulous, careful way, he remembered what the dragon had said.

The only one preventing you from doing anything is you, Uryuu.

“Although it’s one hell of a way to make someone learn a lesson, I guess I take the point.” Uryuu murmured out loud. “And it isn’t just now, either, is it? You didn’t mean just rescuing Inoue-san from Kurotsuchi’s clutches. You meant before, when I fought and lost my powers, too.”

A wry smile touched his lips.

“Maybe it’s a shame, after all, that Quincy can’t communicate with their bows. Perhaps I’d have benefited from it in that battle, if there’d been someone else there to help guide me.”

He pushed open the door of the spare squad bed-chamber, crossing the floor to the table across which the discarded blade lay, dormant and deceptively ordinary looking in the dim twilight that filtered into the chamber through the small slatted windows to his right. For a moment he gazed down at the glittering blade, a pensive look in his indigo eyes as he took in the sleek, smooth form of Ametatsu’s long since abandoned *zanpakutou*. Despite the fact he knew it had belonged to someone else, somehow he also knew it was a part of him — and that, all along, the dragon truly had been right.

“I guess this is what I get for not listening to you, huh?” He murmured, eying the bruises on his arms ruefully as he did so. “I ache all over, and feel like something trampled me into the dust. Are you happy now? You proved your point.”

There was no answer, and despite himself, Uryuu felt faintly disappointed. Shizuki had drawn back of his own accord, even if his memories and emotions were more vivid in Uryuu’s own mind than they had been before, and yet the blade remained silent, as though the barrier between them had doubled on account of that fight.

Was the sword angry with him, then? Had he closed himself off deliberately, because in the end, Uryuu had not managed to prevent the past flooding into the present?

He sighed, turning his back on the weapon and moving across to the window, a faint smile touching his lips as he watched Kiyone and Sentarou squabbling over who would do the squad chores more quickly. 13-Bantai was a completely different place to 6-Bantai, he reflected. Yet somehow he felt more comfortable here than he had done in Byakuya’s stiffly regimented squad buildings, and deep down he wondered if Ametatsu’s own nostalgia and affection for the place had touched his thoughts.

“Though I’m not a Shinigami. I’m a Quincy.” He said aloud. “Even a Quincy without any powers. That’s what I was born and it’s what I am. I’m sorry, Hassuiryou. I can’t change that, not even if you want me to. I can’t be that kind of fighter. It’s not the way I’m built.”

Noone is asking you to become something you’re not, Uryuu.

The voice startled him and he let out a yell, almost falling backwards onto the makeshift pallet bed as he saw the glittering golden orbs suddenly staring at him from the shining surface of the window glass.

There was the faint sound of chuckling, then,

I suppose I startled you again. My apologies. Although it is amusing, watching how you react.

“You could’ve answered me before, when I actually came to speak to you.” Uryuu gathered his wits, turning to shoot the sword a venomous glare. “Instead of… hey! Wait a minute, what… you’re glowing. Why are you glowing? What’s happening?”

In order for a blade to speak directly to its commander, the sword must be released. You really do not know much, do you, Uryuu, where zanpakutou *are concerned?*

“Well, I’m a Quincy.” Uryuu frowned. “There’s no need to be mocking. I thought we established that. I’m not your commander. And I don’t fight with a sword.”

Perhaps not yet. But one day, maybe, you’ll change your tune.

“I doubt it.” Uryuu shook his head. “Even if I was a Shinigami in a life once before. This is how I am now… and I’m not going to change. Not even to suit you, Hassuiryou. Not even to fight alongside you. It’s just not who I am… it’s not who I was raised to be.”

His gaze softened, as he moved to gently pick up the weapon in his grasp.

“My grandfather taught me everything I know.” He added wistfully. “He taught me to be a proper Quincy, with the right values and strengths to protect and defend. I won’t turn my back on those things, no matter what. I intend to make him proud. If I am the last of the Quincy… I intend to make sure that my clan goes out on a high note.”

There was a moment of silence, then Uryuu thought he heard the swish of a long tail, and he turned, almost dropping the weapon in surprise as he made out the ghostly outline of the dragon himself stood watching him.

Those values and emotions do exist inside of you, then. I'm glad, Uryuu. I had hoped that they did… but I could not be sure.

"I get it." Uryuu frowned. "Now you're not sealed in that vault any more, you can talk to me properly… right? That's what this is about. That's what Kurosaki and Abarai meant. About seeing your spirit form… it's this, isn't it?"

You can only see me this way because Ametatsu mastered Bankai, and you still have his recollections.

The dragon responded.

And I am only speaking to you now because, at last, you called me by my name.

"Your name…?" Uryuu's eyes widened, and then he smiled ruefully. "So that's what you meant. About the barrier between us. That I wouldn't hear you or call you by your name. Names are important to *zanpakutou*, aren't they? Well, they're important to everyone, so I should have realised. I've been calling you — thinking of you — just as 'the dragon'. That's why you didn't answer me when I first spoke to you. But when I used your name, you replied. I owe you an apology, Hassuiryou. I won't call you that way again."

I'm glad that you understand.

There was a faint note of wistfulness in the dragon's tones, then,

You are correct, of course. I am not your weapon and you will not fight alongside me — at least, not once Ametatsu's memories are once more laid to rest. I was his blade. I fought for him. You are different… it's not the same at all.

"I guess not."

You sound almost disappointed.

"No." Uryuu shook his head. "I'm just no closer to getting my bow back, that's all. And if I relinquish you too… I really will be useless come the Winter, won't I?"

That depends on whether you take to heart the things I have tried to teach you.

The dragon swished his tail pensively, and Uryuu sat down on his bed, casting his companion a quizzical look.

"You're doing it again, with the random rhetoric." He warned. "Can you be a bit more clear this time on what exactly you mean? It's hard to figure out, otherwise — and you're making my head ache."

There is no use blaming me for that. I come from within your soul, after all. A complicated person spawns a complicated zanpakutou *— there is no use regretting that fact now.*

"And I already told you you belong to him, not to me." Uryuu was unmoved. "So let's quit it with the word games, shall we? Do you know a way that I can get my Quincy powers back, or don't you?"

Of course not. I'm a zanpakutou. *I have nothing to do with the Quincy way of training.*

"Then why did you say…"

I have no idea how a Quincy might unseal his locked away reiryoku.

Hassuiryou's tones were unrepentant.

But I do know that you have tremendous potential inside of you, Uryuu. Even though Ametatsu's reiryoku *was sealed away — and even though you fought a foolish battle you did not understand… it is not the end. I cannot tell you how, or even tell you if you will find a way to recover what you have lost. All I can tell you is that the potential to do so is there inside of you. If it was not, none of this could ever have occurred. Do you understand? You are not a weak fighter. Your weakness is in your mental approach to that fight.*

"I'd already clocked round to that way of thinking myself." Uryuu acknowledged. "You're saying that I broke my own power through recklessness, aren't you?"

I don't think you need me to tell you that.

"Because I fought without knowing what I was protecting." Uryuu glanced at his hands. "Grandfather told me that I would one day fight a battle in which the odds were against me, to protect something important to me. But I fought the battle without knowing that. I thought perhaps I was avenging him, but I don't think… I don't think Grandpa would want to be avenged that way. He wasn't that kind of person, after all. He didn't believe in revenge or violence. He believed in using what we could do to help. Not to harm."

And so? You went against his teachings and you paid the price? Do you regret, then, that fight with Kurotsuchi Mayuri?

"Regret it?" Uryuu sighed. "No. If I hadn't have fought him then, he would've captured Inoue-san and taken her prisoner in his lab while he ran all kinds of horrible tests on her. So in the end, there wasn't another option. Just, if I'd understood better, maybe…"

I've said it before, but you really are a silly boy.

“Huh?” Uryuu glanced up indignantly. “Why are you insulting me now? I thought we’d got beyond that point, Hassuiryou! Why…”

I already told you that denying realities doesn’t make them less real. It only hampers your ability to face and deal with them appropriately.

Hassuiryou chided him softly.

You have accepted the reality of my existence and my bond to Ametatsu. You have accepted that I have more of a purpose than simply a ghost lecturing you in the background. You have called my name, and therefore there is no reason why you cannot take me and use me yourself, so long as Ametatsu’s recollections and strength still surge through you. Yet you still insist on denying this basic truth to yourself.

“Basic… truth?”

All those who fight fight to protect. And when you fought Kurotsuchi Mayuri… what did you seek to protect?

“I…”

You have already told me in your own words the reason for your fight. You wanted to protect two things, didn’t you? The pride of your Quincy race. And…

Uryuu’s face flushed red with embarrassment as he realised the implication in the dragon’s words.

“Inoue-san.” He whispered.

There. It is not so hard, is it, when you try?

“But I…”

Ametatsu fought to defend Ishida Niji, and when she died, to avenge her death.

Hassuiryou spoke gravely.

Inside of you is that same spirit. You fought to defend Inoue Orihime — you used Kidou to escape the 6-Bantai cell in order to make sure she was safe. She is one you care for greatly — whether you prefer to see her as your friend and ally or as something more. There is no shame in having those feelings, either. You are not the only person in this world, after all. The people around you drive you forwards as well as kick you back. The more you trust in them, the stronger you will become. It takes far more strength to fight for another, after all, than it does to simply fight for yourself.

Uryuu sighed heavily, rubbing his temples as he digested the truth

of this.

"You really like to lecture folk, don't you?" He said in resignation.

I don't recall ever having to lecture Ametatsu quite as much as this.

Hassuiryou admitted.

But then he was more open to the ideas and values of a zanpakutou *and a Shinigami's relationship with one another. And you are not that way. Still, I don't suppose I can blame you for that. It would be wrong, after all, to expect you to be him.*

"I don't think I could be, even if I tried." Uryuu shook his head. "In the end, there are too many differences between us."

And when Ametatsu's spirit and recollections are once more severed and sealed, you and I will no longer speak like this.

There was regret in the dragon's tones.

If you ever wield a zanpakutou*, after all, it will be one of your own devising. A* zanpakutou *can only fight for one master. No matter whether the same soul is born again and again — this circumstance cannot happen again. I am his sword. When he is gone, so will I be.*

Uryuu frowned, running his fingers tentatively along the sharp, fluid blade. Then,

"But you will help me, won't you?" He asked hesitantly. "Tomorrow, if we go to see Kurotsuchi. You will come, won't you? And… if I need you… you'll help?"

Yes, Uryuu. I will help.

Hassuiryou agreed softly.

It is what Ametatsu would have wanted, after all.

"Ishida?"

At the sound of Ichigo's voice, Uryuu turned, meeting his classmate's quizzical look with a frown.

"Something up?" He asked softly, and Ichigo shook his head, stepping into the room and pausing as he took in the unsealed *zanpakutou* cradled across Uryuu's lap.

"What are you doing with that?" He asked bluntly. "If you're going to go nuts with it again, Ishida, I swear…"

"You're so violent sometimes." Uryuu shook his head impatiently.

“I’m not going to do anything of the sort. It’s all right. You don’t need to come and rescue me from myself. I’m quite fine.”

Ichigo’s eyes narrowed, and he glanced from the blade to his friend. Then comprehension flickered in his dark gaze.

“You were talking to it, weren’t you?” He said quietly. “And the other night, too — when I thought you were babblin’ to someone an’ you told me noone was there. You’ve been chattin’ to this thing for a while… haven’t you? It wasn’t just that one time at 6-Bantai. You’ve been doin’ it a lot more than that. But you didn’t say anything.”

“It wasn’t any of your business.” Uryuu got to his feet, setting the weapon down on the table once more, and watching as it glittered and returned to its dormant form. “I don’t ask you what kind of things you talk about with Zangetsu, do I?”

“No, but still… shit, it’s too weird to get my head around.” Ichigo shook his head, a rueful look on his sharp features. “You’re a friggin’ Quincy. Now you’re havin’ dialogue with some dead guy’s *zanpakutou*? I know Byakuya said that you were this Shizuki guy reincarnated, an’ I guess that I can’t not believe that. But even so…”

“Hassuiryou isn’t my sword.” Uryuu shook his head, startling himself at the faint sense of regret that stirred inside of him at this admission. “He’s Shizuki Ametatsu’s and he always has been. I’m still the same as I was before, Kurosaki. A Quincy with no *reiryoku*. And I can’t hide behind a weapon that isn’t mine. If I’m going to fight in the Winter, then I’m going to have to find a way to relocate my own strength. Whether it’s even possible, I don’t know. But you don’t need to get your head round anything. When we leave here, Hassuiryou will be sealed again and that will be that.”

“So why did you insist so much on keepin’ it with you?” Ichigo lounged up against the doorpost. “An’ why were you talkin’ to it, if you feel that way?”

“I guess because, at the moment, my soul’s connected to him.” Uryuu pursed his lips. “Besides, even if Hassuiryou belonged to a Shinigami, he belonged to a Shinigami who cared about the Quincy and what happened to them. So in that light, I’m not really turning my back on my values. Ametatsu-san wasn’t the kind of Shinigami who believed the Quincy were enemies who should be destroyed. In fact, he saved the life of one of my ancestors. That’s probably why I have this name and why our kanji is the same. It’s none of it coincidence. Only that kind of Shinigami could possibly be reborn as a Quincy, after all.”

“Sure, keep telling yourself that.” Ichigo grinned, clapping a rough hand down on his companion’s shoulder. “But leave your treasure preenin’ routine for the time being, okay? Renji just showed up here with that Kira dude… an’ he wanted to know if you were still up an’ around. Byakuya might’ve pulled himself out of this, an’ he’s got Rukia confined to 6-Bantai till that Shizuki guy’s been pulled out of you completely. But there’s still one matter to settle… isn’t there?”

“Yes.” Uryuu’s eyes narrowed. “Kurotsuchi Mayuri.”

“Right.” Ichigo agreed. “Ukitake-san doesn’t think that a full on frontal assault is a good idea, sadly — because a couple of folk’d like t’sharpen their blades on his false chin. But the old guy does think that Kurotsuchi’s research material into this — and any other residual souls — should be destroyed or turned over to the Sou Taichou dude rather than let anything like this happen again.”

“I agree.” Uryuu pursed his lips. “Kurosaki… whatever extra powers this has given me, it shouldn’t have been able to happen. Ametatsu-san wanted oblivion. He didn’t want to have to repeat his past and because of Kurotsuchi’s meddling, he’s been made to do it. And because I have his memories right now, I’ve been made to, too. It’s not nice, having someone else’s grief pounding on your thoughts all the time. I want to make sure Kurotsuchi doesn’t get to do this particular experiment on anyone ever again.”

“Ukitake-san thinks that because of the need for firepower come the Winter, Kurotsuchi will probably escape with a slapped wrist.” Ichigo admitted, as the two boys made their way back towards 13-Bantai’s central hall. “But I guess that can’t be helped, considering.”

“Guess not.” Uryuu frowned. “It’s all right. Right at the moment, I could only fight him with borrowed power, after all. That’s not good enough for me. If and when I take him down, Kurosaki, it’ll be with my own power. As a Quincy.”

“Then you think you can get your powers back?”

“Don’t know.” Uryuu admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to give up on the idea. I won’t be useless come the Winter. That much I’m sure of. Whatever I can do, I will do. I’m decided. On the pride of the Quincy, that’s what I’ll do.”

“Yeah, you’re still Ishida all right.” Ichigo observed ruefully, but there was a flicker of relief in his dark eyes. “Come on. Inoue’s been worrying about you, an’ whatever you say, long dialogues with someone else’s dead blade is not healthy. Come talk to some real people for a while, okay? We’ve got Kurotsuchi nailed, in any case.

Not only did he take Inoue hostage, he also knocked out Kira an' his squad. Kira remembers it clearly enough to point the finger… so you wanna be part of the take-down squad, right?"

"If it means I get to see him squirm, then without a doubt." Uryuu said frankly. "It's all right, Kurosaki. I'm right behind you."

The chamber was silent.

By the flower-panelled wall, Byakuya knelt, his body stiff and silent as a sentry as he stood guard over his injured young sister. He had taken her to the family home in the end, determined to keep her out of harm's way, yet he knew deep down that no matter how hard he tried to do that, he always seemed to be a step behind.

Renji had left his side not long after, and Byakuya had made not attempt to stop him, knowing that the Rukongai Vice Captain intended to return to the front line and continue aiding the ryoka boy and his friends in their dilemma. Although he had not said as much, Byakuya had been only too glad to let him go. Renji was strong, after all. Strong enough to make decisions and, with luck, carry them through to the end without failure. If he was to one day be a Captain, he had to learn such things without always being guided. And as time went on, Byakuya was more and more convinced that his second in command was one who would one day wear the *haori*. Surprisingly, this thought did not disgust or horrify the noble-born Captain as much as he had once thought such a thing would. In fact, he admitted grudgingly to himself, much as they had had their differences, he knew that he had grown to have an amount of respect for his current adjutant.

Perhaps, then, I will support him in the way Ukitake supported Shizuki. And perhaps, Ukitake knows that better than I even do myself.
His brows knitted together as he contemplated this thought. Though he was still somewhat angry at the 13-Bantai Captain's choice of phrasing, he knew deep down that the older man had been — as he so infuriatingly often was — right in his assessment of Byakuya's own motives. It had surprised him that Ukitake had lied to protect his former subordinate, or gone so far to protect him. But then, Byakuya was no longer so naive as he had once been. And he had learnt, in the harshest, most painful way, that being a son of a Noble house could easily mean nothing at all.

His fingers strayed instinctively to his chest where, beneath the thick cloth of the *hakama* and *haori* he knew the scarring wound inflicted upon him by Ichimaru's Shinsou was still in the process of

healing.
If the Great Noble Houses do not obey the rules, who will?

His own words flitted across his senses, almost teasing him, and he shook his head as thought to clear it.

To support a strong candidate towards taking the *haori* was not a breach of rules, after all. Foolish captains of noble birth had worn the *haori* in the past, and as he thought more about it, he realised that — whatever the true details of it — Ukitake's actions in protecting Shizuki had been as much a condemnation of the Shihouin-ke's desire to do as they liked as it had been loyalty towards a dead subordinate.

And right now, have I broken those rules, in allowing my Vice Captain to leave the barracks and pursue a private matter against a fellow Captain? Perhaps I have. Perhaps by doing nothing I have done something wrong. But perhaps there are rules in Soul Society that should be fought against, after all. If Kurotsuchi has caused the recent events, then he should be subject to the same rules that govern those who rank below him. There is no place in this Soul Society for Captains to do as they please without restraint. Aizen's behaviour has proven that. In which case, to support one who is honest cannot be seen as a sin, surely? Not even if that honesty makes him flawed in other ways. Renji's emotions are his weakness, but perhaps they are also his strength. This time, I will let him have his head. We will see what comes of it. In the end, it is the only way.
His eyes narrowed.

If I am honest, perhaps I have *already made up my mind to support Renji in becoming Rukongai's next Captain representative. But if I do so, I will be sure not to make the same mistakes Ukitake obviously did when fostering Shizuki Ametatsu's potential. If you are born in Rukongai, you already face hardship and pain. To become a Captain is a dream most will never reach. If he is to reach it, I will do what I can to ascertain he does not succumb to his weaknesses before realising his real potential.*

A faint, rueful smile touched his lips at this.

"It seems I am still as rebellious as I ever was, Grandfather." He reflected, glancing briefly across the sprawling Kuchiki estate grounds to where his illustrious Grandfather's memorial tomb stood. "And my attachment to Rukongai has grown stronger, not weaker, since Hisana's death. Though perhaps I have finally learnt the lessons you hoped so much to help me learn. And I can't say I learnt them without pain — but then, if I had heeded your warnings, maybe it would have been different."

He closed his eyes, as memories flooded across his senses.

“I wish you would reconsider.”

With a heavy sigh, the elderly Shinigami turned from his position at the window, regarding his young companion regretfully as he slowly shook his head. “It’s an unwise move, Byakuya. With all the work you’ve done and all the training to get to where you are… do you realise the risks you’re going to bring down on the heads of this clan if you continue to act in such a reckless manner?”

At his tones, the young man stiffened, obstinacy clouding his grey eyes.

“Grandfather, the decision is my own to make.” He said softly. “Haven’t you always taught me to make my own decisions? What kind of head of the clan will I make, if I am unable to do such things by myself?”

“I dare not imagine.” Ginrei stroked his beard absently, pain in his gaze. “I know you’re young. I know too well your impulsiveness and the idealism that threatens your very stability as a future head of this clan. And I’m not going to be here forever to guide or chastise you. I can’t keep protecting you from the worst of people’s tongues, my boy. Do you realise how much discussion has already been generated about your proposal to take a Rukongai girl as your wife?”

Byakuya’s lips thinned.

“I happen to care greatly for Hisana.” He said coldly. “With no disrespect, sir, I don’t believe that’s an area in which you can govern me. I am, as you say, the future of this clan. In the end, if I choose it to be that way, there is no choice for others to make but to accept it. That is, after all, what it means to be a Kuchiki.”

Ginrei’s eyes closed briefly, and he sighed.

“You are still fool young to understand, it seems.” He murmured. “Byakuya, your parents entrusted you to me and I have done my best. But there are scarce few forces in place to pull a Kuchiki son down and make him see the errors of his actions. You truly do not understand yet what the consequences of a match like this could be. Not just for you, but for your family, and also, even, for the girl herself?”

“Why?” Byakuya’s eyes glittered with anger. “Because I choose to raise her from the slums that fate cast her into and bring her into my home? I do not love Hisana because of those things. Those things are worthless. I love her because of who she is to me. I won’t be talked out of it. I am decided. And besides, since I already made to her an offer of marriage, it will not be retracted. She is the woman I intend to marry. I do not go back on my word.”

Ginrei rubbed his temples.

“There are a lot of people putting pressure on me to negate this match, or even to put pressure on you to do so yourself.” He said finally. “There has even been talk in some of the branches of disinheritance or disgrace if you choose to follow this path. I care very much for your well being, my boy. You know that, I think. You have always been the pride of this clan and the one most gifted in every respect. But your wilful, spoiled nature will one day be the death of you. Or, no, I fear more that it will be the death of someone you care for. You do not yet truly understand the price of being a Kuchiki. I only hope that one day that weight will not crash down on your shoulders and be too much to bear.”

Byakuya’s eyes narrowed.

“I am not scared of the clan.” He said frostily. “I never have been. Do you intend to disinherit me, Grandfather? Because even if you say so, you won’t sway my will. I am decided. A man of honour does not break his word.”

Ginrei shook his head.

“I will not disinherit you. As you say, promises are not things that should be easily broken.” He said gently. “But listen, please, at least to my concerns. A match that spans so many classes can only bring heartbreak in the end. Hisana is a beautiful young woman, true. Intelligent, perhaps. I have no reason to judge either her manners or her personality in an ill light. But do you realise the censure that will fall on her head from outside? Other noble clans will feel offended that the heir to the Kuchiki clan has shunned them in favour of a girl from Inazuri. And she will feel the backlash, even if they are too afraid to launch it at you yourself. She does not have the protection you have. She is from Rukongai. You are from Seireitei. The difference is that you are a Kuchiki by blood. But Hisana… if she falls from favour, she falls alone.”

Byakuya was silent for a long time, digesting this. Then, slowly, he shook his head.

“You misjudge me.” He said finally. “I will not allow Hisana to be so targeted. If I have to protect her every waking minute, so I shall. All these things I have thought over and have become convinced of, Grandfather. Hisana is something I have never encountered in my life before. Likely I will never encounter it again. I will not let that fleeting spark of light so easily escape my fingers.”

“I see.” Ginrei sighed heavily. “And nothing I will say can change your heart, can it?”

“Nothing at all.”

Ginrei frowned, looking suddenly old and weary as he spread his hands.

"I trust you will not live to regret your impetuosity of feeling." he said sadly. "There are some gaps, Byakuya, that must not be breached. No matter what the reason. I hope you will not learn that the hard way."

"If you fall, you fall alone."

Byakuya rested his hand gently against Rukia's sleek dark hair, watching as the girl's chest rose and fell rhythmically with each intake of breath. She was sleeping peacefully now, he knew, and she was in no danger from the Kidou attack — in fact, the family doctors had assured him that even her convalescence probably would not be delayed any further by the incident. Yet even as he had chosen to watch over her, absorbing Hisana's features etched onto the girl's young face, he had found himself reminded of Ginrei's advice to him so many years ago.

Well, Grandfather, in the end perhaps you were correct, and I bow to you in acknowledgement of that fact.

He sighed, sitting back on his heels as he contemplated.

But even so, I don't regret the five years Hisana gave me. They were happy, even if so much else before and since was not. Even if, as so often it's been, the Kuchiki name and title was still a barrier between us — even if at times she felt alone and isolated and I could not protect her from it. At least I had her, and I treasure that most of all, despite our differences.

He smiled sadly.

And now, I have Rukia. And even though I couldn't protect Hisana as I hoped to, I will protect Rukia. I will keep that promise, if none other. For Hisana's sake… I will not let further harm befall her younger sister.

He pursed his lips, remembering Ginrei's expression one last time.

Renji, I hope you will forgive me. But the actions of that young Quincy fool, possessed or not, have only convinced me further that there are gaps that should not be breached. I already sinned by bringing both Hisana and Rukia into a world to which they did not belong. Rukia almost died because of it. And the tale of Shizuki Ametatsu and his Real World amour has only proven Grandfather's words right once again. There are some gaps that ***cannot*** *be breached. Some situations in which you cannot protect the one you want most to protect, even if you try to give your all to do so. If I intend to sin again against my family's code to the point of supporting a Rukongai Shinigami to the highest level of office, then I must also be prepared to ensure that his affections do not cloud his judgement in the way they clouded Shizuki's.*

He pursed his lips.

Rukia is a Kuchiki now. Whatever the past… that cannot be taken back. Ukitake was right also, though I hate to admit it. There is no feeling like that feeling… no loss like that loss. And if I can, I will do all I can to prevent others from feeling it. Even if that means that I stand between two people and act as my Grandfather acted, all those years ago.

"Nii-sama?"

Rukia's voice startled him back to reality, and he turned, glancing down at her as she raised confused dark eyes to his.

"What… where…?"

"You took a blow in the ruckus at 6-Bantai, but you are not seriously hurt." Byakuya explained briefly. "I brought you back here for peace and quiet… since at present I do not think it wise for you to be in the company of your ryoka friends."

"Ishida fired Kidou at me, didn't he?" Rukia pulled herself into a sitting position, rubbing her temples as she digested his words. Then she paused, glancing at Byakuya anxiously.

"You didn't… kill him, did you?" She asked warily, and Byakuya shook his head.

"I did not." He agreed. "Although I will not pretend that the idea did not cross my mind. He was extremely dangerous whilst that rogue had control of his body… and he attacked you. Not only that, within the confines of my own squad offices. I will not tolerate such grave insults against my family or my position — so he is fortunate, in the end, that your Captain came to intervene."

"Ukitake-taichou did?" Rukia looked surprised, then she sighed, relief flooding her expression. "Well, then I'm glad. Maybe now everything can be resolved one way or another."

"If so, it will be done without your involvement." Byakuya said quietly, and Rukia stared at him.

"Nii… sama?"

"I have already told you. I will not tolerate you being hurt."

Rukia stared at him for a moment. Then she shook her head.

"Ichigo came for our help. So did Ishida." She said matter-of-factly. "We have to see it through to the end, surely?"

"Ukitake will take it from this point on." Byakuya said briskly.

“Though I have no axe to wield against the Quincy boy, I have no interest in a dead Captain from Rukongai.”

Rukia sighed.

“You can’t always protect me from everything, Nii-sama.” She murmured softly, and Byakuya started, staring at her as he interpreted her words. “I’m not angry with you, after all. For what happened before. There were a lot of things that weren’t understood by either of us, then. But… but Ichigo and the others are my friends. Going to the Real World changed a lot of things for me, after all. And though… though Hisana was my… my sister, I… I’m not her. I… I don’t need to be protected all… all of the time.”

Byakuya’s eyes widened at this direct speech, and Rukia reddened, looking uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry.” She added. “I’m being rude, I know, and… and maybe ungrateful. But…”

Byakuya’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then he shook his head.

“No, perhaps the true fault is mine.” He said heavily, and Rukia stared at him, losing the thread of her sentence as she interpreted the expression on his handsome features.

“Nii… sama?”

“When I made my promise to Hisana, I did not understand what it was I promised.” Byakuya got carefully to his feet, gazing down at her as he did so. “Though she tried to explain it to me, I was too affected by her death to interpret it in any light other than the one in which I did. She asked me to allow you to call me brother, since she could not call herself truly your sister. I have done all I could to ensure the former. Yet I did not understand the meaning of the latter. Hisana felt she had no right to be your sister because she abandoned you and paid you no heed as you grew up. I have in essence done little different, have I? There is next to no meaning in the use of a word alone. To this point, perhaps, I have no right for you to call me ‘brother’, or feel an attachment to the Kuchiki-ke at all.”

A faintly wistful smile touched his features.

“You are, I think, far more content with your ryoka friends and Renji than you ever are within this family.” He added sadly. “And I have done little to change that fact.”

Rukia’s eyes softened.

“You saved my life against Ichimaru Gin’s sword.” She said gently,

and Byakuya shook his head.

“No.” He said heavily. “Kurosaki Ichigo was the one who saved your life. My actions were too little, and almost too late. Had I died then, I would still have not made amends for everything else.”

“Nii-sama, I don’t…”

“My Grandfather once warned me about the consequences of my actions.” Byakuya murmured. “And I, a wilful, strong boy, did not choose to heed him. I did not understand the burdens of making Hisana part of my world. Nor you. But I am beginning to understand them. Yet… even so… Rukia, you are a Kuchiki now. There is nothing to be done about that. And even if you asked it of me, I would not make any attempt to change it. I made a promise to Hisana — one I should not have made, perhaps, but one I chose to make. Therefore I will ensure I uphold it.”

Rukia reached out a hand to touch the edge of his *haori*, and Byakuya stared at her in surprise.

“Rukia?”

“When you took Ichimaru’s sword for me, I realised you were my brother, now, after all.” Rukia said softly, embarrassment in her expression. “When you told me about Hisana, I understood. You don’t need to be sorry for that. Or for protecting me, now. I just… am not someone easily protected. I want to be useful, and use the training I have. Now I’ve been to the Real World, after all, I know what we’re here to watch over. And I have people I care about there who should be able to live safely, too.”

Byakuya offered her a rueful smile, his grey eyes lighting up with rare humour at her earnest expression.

“I will not ever understand, I suppose, the appeal of the Real World.” He mused. “I am from Seireitei. That has always been my world.”

Rukia looked surprised at this heartfelt honesty, then she returned the smile.

“And I’ll always be at least some part from Rukongai.” She said matter-of-factly. “I think it’s just how things are. But… I’m proud to be part of the Kuchiki-ke now, Nii-sama. I’m honoured that you want me as part of your clan, even if it was for Hisana’s sake. And I don’t mean to do anything to disgrace you, if I can prevent it. Just… I’m a Shinigami. Hisana wasn’t. I’ve been trained to fight to keep the balance of this world. And I want to do that. If I’m doing it as a

Kuchiki, then I'll do it that way."

She looked sheepish.

"I admit, when Renji and I first decided to become Shinigami, it was to escape the slums and live somewhere better." She admitted. "We didn't know anything about what we were getting into. But now I'm here, and I do know. I'm glad you said I could go back to 13-Bantai, because that's my squad. And I hope… I think..maybe you understand that that means a lot to me. Even though K… Kaien-dono isn't there any more. I still belong there, with them."

"Shiba Kaien." Byakuya pursed his lips, and Rukia nodded.

"I'm going to try and put that behind me now." She told him earnestly. "As much as I can. Now I've spoken to Kuukaku-san and Ganju-san and got some perspective. I miss him. He was a good Vice Captain and I looked up to him a… a lot. But… I'm not going to dwell on it any more. I know you were angry, Nii-sama, when it happened. I thought then that it was because I'd somehow brought shame on the Kuchiki name by spilling the blood of the head of the Shiba-ke. But… maybe it was because… you were worried about me?"

"Ukitake was a Captain I trusted more than any other to keep you safe from harm." Byakuya said honestly. "And I feel that, that night, he failed."

He looked pensive.

"Perhaps you are right, however. You cannot always be protected." He admitted. "And I will strive to remember it. Because whatever the reason, you and I are family now. And I wish to preserve that fact. Not for Hisana's sake, Rukia… but for our own. Even if I do not have the same ease of manner as your former Vice Captain or your rough-spoken friends… that is my wish and I hope you will remember it."

Rukia eyed him for a moment, emotion glittering in her dark blue eyes, and Byakuya half felt that, if the situation and the social protocol had been different, she might have hugged him. A faint flicker of regret stirred inside of him as he realised yet again that being a Kuchiki really did interfere in every aspect of a Shinigami's life.

"Grandfather was a wise man." He murmured, more than half to himself. "I wish he had been here longer, to give me the guidance I chose to ignore when he was alive. I think, perhaps then, we would both have had an easier transition into the way things are now."

He reached across to rest his hand on her shoulder.

“We will not discuss these things again. They should not need to be repeated.” He said softly. “I have already, probably, spoken more than is appropriate. But the truth is, Rukia, I have striven hard for a long time to be like my Grandfather. To be strong and distant, unbiased and obedient to the laws of Soul Society. In comparison to him and his repute, I am a gravely flawed being, after all.”

“Nii-sama…?” Rukia looked startled, and Byakuya smiled ruefully.

“I know how you probably see me.” He murmured. “And I won’t pretend I intend to change my manner in any respect. Even if, at times, there are other things beneath the surface left unsaid.”

He shrugged, remembering with a flicker of regret the idealistic, headstrong days of his youth.

“Being the head of the Kuchiki clan does not allow you, always, to be true to yourself.” He said at length. “This is what Grandfather taught me most of all, and something I have come to take to heart in its entirety. Being so causes pain for those around you, and so I must never falter. Still, between us I would have no further misunderstandings. Whatever occurs from hereon in, you and I are brother and sister. And if you ever need my help, even after you return to your squad and undertake the duties assigned you there, you should not have fear to ask. I will not turn you away. Not even if the request involves ryoka boys with red hair and foul tongues.”

Rukia’s expression lit up with humour at this, and she nodded.

“I know, and I understand.” She said sincerely. “I think there have been times I didn’t, but I do now. It’s all right, Nii-sama. I know how things are within the Kuchiki-ke better than anyone else, in some ways. And I know I’m not as alone as I thought I was. Just… you don’t have to protect me. I’ll be strong on my own, from now. I’m resolved to be. Kaien-dono would want me to be. Soul Society needs me to be. 13-Bantai are there to help me to be. And so are you. Come the Winter, Seireitei will need everyone it has. And I won’t run away. I’ll be there. Just like you.”

Byakuya eyed her, taking in the resolute look in her dark eyes, and a pang of nostalgia touched his heart once again as he saw the ghost of his dead wife staring up at him.

“When you speak like that, you truly are like Hisana.” He murmured. “And it makes me glad that, wrong as it may have been, I sought to keep that promise.”

He smiled.

“One day, we will speak of Hisana properly.” He added. “But not yet. There is time yet.”

“I’d like that.” Rukia looked surprised.

“Then we shall. When you are recovered, and I less preoccupied with matters of squad and kin.”

“Nii-sama, are you really not going to help Ishida and Ichigo any more this time?”

“I have no need to.” Despite himself, Byakuya’s eyes glittered with wry humour. “My Vice Captain seems quite happy to take it into his hands, and I have no will to prevent him.”

“Renji…?”

“Yes.” Byakuya agreed. “I do not wish to be further involved, Rukia. Shizuki Ametatsu sparks too many unpleasant memories of how those who cross divides can so easily fall from grace. I will leave it in his hands from now. Ukitake has it in hand, after all. It is no longer my affair. And I have no residual interest in something that was my Grandfather’s province. The boy is no longer at 6-Bantai, so the matter for me is closed.”

Rukia sighed.

“And you really won’t let me go…?”

“I would rather not issue a command to that effect.” Byakuya admitted. “But I do not want you going near that boy whilst he may pose a threat.”

Rukia looked thoughtful, looking him straight in the eyes.

“I’m not going to disappear, not like Hisana did.” She said boldly, startling her companion by her sudden perception. “I’m not going to leave you to face the Spring alone, Nii-sama… even if I’m a poor comparison, I intend to stay here. The thing I know most about being a Kuchiki is that it’s a lonely business, after all. But it’s less lonely, if you have me and I have you. So I’ll always come back. Even if I do go into danger… I’m not going to be easy to kill. I promise. You won’t get rid of me that easily… no matter what happens.”

Byakuya stared at her, beyond words, and Rukia grinned self-consciously.

“That wasn’t very polite, was it.” She said sheepishly. “I’m sorry. I suppose I forgot myself a little. I didn’t mean…”

Byakuya shook his head, determination and defiance flaring in his

grey eyes as it had not done since the day he had laid Hisana to rest.

"There is no rudeness between brother and sister." He said softly, only just keeping his tones level as his emotions swirled within him. "I understand your sentiments perfectly. Thank you, Rukia."

Before she knew what he was doing, he had taken her gently by the shoulders, hugging her tightly to him as he did so.

"This is also impolite and inappropriate on many levels." He murmured, as she stared at him in shock. "But I do not care. Not this time. I broke rules and I will not punish others for my having done so. Do as you please, Rukia. But remember the promise you have made. I will hold you to it, after all."

He released his grasp, suddenly feeling self-conscious at having let his impulsive nature take charge of his body.

"I have business to which I must attend." He said evenly. "If you are going out early on the morrow, be sure not to disturb my retainers. Many of them will be hard at work, even at that time."

With that he bowed his head towards her, withdrawing from the chamber before she could reply.
Was that you, Hisana, driving me to keep my word after all?

He stared at the sliding door, taking a deep breath as he re-composed himself.

It's been a long time since I allowed that wilful, impulsive child to take over… to do as I pleased, regardless of protocol. But in this case, I hope you will continue to guide me. I will do what I can, Hisana, to make her my true sister. And even if it's from afar… I ***will*** *still protect her. So much as any brother can truly protect his sister.*

He sighed, closing his eyes.

Thank you, Grandfather. Thank you, Hisana. I understand much more, now. And I will endeavour to understand more as time goes on.

With that he turned on his heel, heading back towards his office once more the composed, unflappable nobleman as he flicked his hand in the direction of this or that house servant to do his bidding.

There was no place, after all, in the Kuchiki-ke for a wilful, impulsive child. Yet it still lived within him, and somehow, Byakuya was glad.

It seems Shiba Kaien and Shizuki Ametatsu are not the only spirits being laid to rest. Perhaps it's time I moved forward, too… towards what will be

asked of me, as head of the Kuchiki-ke, come the Winter.

See, people, I told you I wasn't done yet!

It's not over till Byakuya sings. Er. No. Too much Bleach Soul Sonic there… I mean till the Epilogue. :)

Speaking of Byakuya…

Author's Note: Byakuya.

I sort of feel an explanation is due where Byakkun is involved, particularly at this point in the story.

My interpretation of Byakuya is founded on the Byakkun we see in the Pendulum Arc, even though it's for only the briefest of moments. That hot-tempered, impulsive, proud-spirited young whelp of a boy is, in my belief, the real Byakuya. Obviously since then much has happened. He's lost his wife, adopted Rukia, broken the family rules, sworn oaths on his parents' graves, probably lost his Grandfather and mentor, taken over 6-Bantai and become head of the Kuchiki clan. But even though he's adopted this calm, well ordered veneer of disinterestedness, sometimes the real Byakuya shows through the cracks. In the fight with Ichigo, for example, he occasionally shows his genuine anger and frustration… when Rukia is about to be executed, his expression clearly shows his pain. Byakuya's made the choice to obey the rules and live up to the expectations of his clan. But the face he shows Seireitei and the way he feels about things inside are probably often at odds with one another.

My attitude towards him in this story has followed that premise. I've written him as detached and austere, but also with a flicker of that past self still lurking at the edges. Obviously, that's just my interpretation of him, so some people may consider that to be out of character. This scene in particular may well seem that way. I don't personally think that's the case. But so many things are open to interpretation.

This is simply how I see Byakuya's character. I don't think I could ever write him any other way… this is just how he is to me.

Chapter Twenty Six:The Kurotsuchi Affair

Chapter Twenty Six: The Kurotsuchi Affair

"And this is a complete account of everything that you remember happening the night that 3-Bantai was invaded?"

Ukitake set aside the neatly written sheets of paper, casting Kira a quizzical look as the young Vice Captain nodded his head. It was early the next morning and, having risen early despite the protests of his protective squad adjutants, Ukitake had decided to go to his office while he thought over the best way to tackle the sticky problem of Kurotsuchi's experimentation. He had only been there a short time, however, before there had been a knock on the door, and Kiyone had told him that the 3-Bantai Vice Captain had come to pay him a visit.

He glanced at Kira now, taking in his appearance thoughtfully. He looked tired, true, and somewhat worn from recent events. Yet there was also more life and hope in the blue eyes than there had been the day of the Captain's meeting, and secretly Ukitake was glad to see it. Whatever had occurred in its name, he reflected, Hitsugaya had made the right decision in handing this assignment to the Shinigami who had most needed the distraction.

"Yes, sir. In as much detail as I can recall." Kira said soberly now, in answer to the Captain's question. "I was going to submit it to Kuchiki-taichou and Hitsugaya-taichou, but Abarai-kun didn't seem to think that Kuchiki-taichou would be very interested in it all now and… and that since you now had the sword, I should… probably speak to you instead. In truth, I had it with me last night but… but you seemed tired, then, and… and I wasn't sure if it was as important, now that the sword had been retrieved. Just, this morning Abarai-kun said you were going to do something about it, so I thought about what to do a lot last night, and I decided that I would let you see it after all."

He bit his lip, hesitating for a moment, then,

"I'm sorry to bother you with it when you've been unwell." He added properly. "But you have helped me too, these last few days. And I… I'd be glad if you'd advise me on what I should best do about this whole affair. I've hesitated because it deals with another Captain but I realise that what happened at 3-Bantai was a serious matter and as Vice Captain… no, as the current *officer in charge* of that squad —

it's my duty to submit a report to someone, even if it's not an easy one to make."

"Mm." Ukitake rubbed his chin thoughtfully, slowly nodding his head. "I can see your reason for hesitation, to be honest. And, I'm glad you came to me and not to another Captain… at least for the time being. I think I can say safely that I know as much about this as anyone else. And I *am* concerned that your safety was so badly jeopardised, Kira… that should not have happened in any vein or form. Still…"

His gaze flitted to the ajar office door, and Kira turned, hurrying to slide it shut before returning to the desk.

"Kurotsuchi sometimes allows his interests to overtake his judgement." Ukitake said softly. "It has happened before and doubtless will again. But he is not a traitor to Soul Society and, come the Winter, we *will* need him. He can be a dangerous opponent and a valuable ally… Kira, I hope you won't be upset when I say that I hope you'll allow me to handle this myself. At least, for now, without the involvement of any other Captains or the Sou Taichou."

"I… to be honest, I don't think I want to go up against Kurotsuchi-taichou all that much." Kira admitted frankly. "I don't want to cause more problems for 3-Bantai and I'm no match for him if there was to be another attack. I just… I want to know I've completed my duty successfully and handed over all the weaponry to 1-Bantai. So as long as, when this is over, I can do that… I'm quite happy to leave it all with you, Ukitake-taichou. I'm sure that you'll resolve it for the best."

Ukitake eyed Kira for a moment, then he smiled.

"Your faith in the *haori* is overwhelming, even despite your recent experiences." He murmured. 'I will do my best to live up to your expectations, without a doubt. But Kira, you should also try not to trust in every decision a leader makes without carefully considering their reasons for doing so. That's the difference between a leader and a follower, in the end. At present you must learn to be a leader… whatever the future holds. You know that too, I think, and I think you're more than capable of achieving it if you can face down your doubts. So whilst I'm not encouraging you to rebel against Captain's orders,' As Kira's expression became one of dismay, "I am urging you to think about those orders before accepting them without a second thought. One day you may have another Captain appointed over you, and I'm sure you will be as loyal to that Captain as you were to Ichimaru. But don't forget what Ichimaru did, either. Because it might just happen that one day you are the leader, just like you are now.

And in that situation, you have to be able to lead."

Kira digested this, slowly nodding his head.

"I know." He admitted. "And I won't ever forget what happened with Ichimaru-taichou. I looked up to him a lot, and I'll probably feel angry and betrayed by what he did for a long time to come. But… I want to move past it. For 3-Bantai's sake."

He smiled.

"Ukitake-taichou, thank you for your support at the Captain's meeting." He added. "I haven't had a chance to say it, but I know that what you said probably carried weight and I'm grateful for it."

"Well, you might already have realised that I believe in people having the chance to prove themselves." Ukitake looked rueful. "Sometimes it's the right decision, sometimes not. But I'll keep doing it, regardless. You were Ichimaru's pawn. Many of us were somewhat in that position, too. There's no reason to vilify a few for the oversight of, in the end, many Shinigami officers and adjutants where Aizen was concerned."

"Yes, sir."

Ukitake patted the report.

"Leave this with me." He added. "I will keep it and, if necessary, I'll give it to the Sou Taichou myself. But I hope it won't come to that. I intend on going to see Kurotsuchi myself shortly, to discuss it with him face to face. I think it's better that way, Captain to Captain. The more people who go, the more confrontational it will seem."

"I don't mind not going." Kira admitted. "But… other people might not feel the same way."

"Mm. I realise that." Ukitake nodded. "Young Abarai is quite heated about the whole thing, since both you and Kuchiki took injury on account of Kurotsuchi's meddling. And Ichigo-kun's indignant, too, for the hurts caused to his friends. As for the Quincy boy himself…"

He trailed off, his eyes narrowing as his gaze flitted towards the door.

"Speak of the devil." He murmured, then, raising his voice, "Ishida-kun? If you want to speak to me, step inside. The door's open, after all."

There was a moment of hesitation, then the door slid slowly back, and Ukitake met the sheepish gaze of the young Quincy standing

beyond. He smiled, nodding his head.

“Your reiatsu is unusual at the moment, but still fairly easy to pinpoint.” He said softly. “Was there something you wanted to say?”

“Only that… if you’re going to speak to Kurotsuchi, I want to go too.” Uryuu summoned his courage, resolution in his dark blue eyes. “With Hassuiryou. We both have reasons… please, Ukitake-san, I want to come too.”

“*With* Hassuiryou?” Kira’s eyes almost fell out of his head. “But…”

“Kira is quite anxious to take custody of the blade and return it to its rightful place in confinement.” Ukitake said softly, and Uryuu looked stricken, then slowly shook his head.

“Not yet.” He said anxiously. “Please, Ukitake-san. Kira-san. I know it’s not my *zanpakutou* and I know that I’m not supposed to have it. But… this isn’t just about me any more. It’s about Ametatsu-san, too. And Hassuiryou was his sword. So… so if something’s going to be resolved, we should both be involved.”

“I am not going to fight with Kurotsuchi. I am going to talk to him.” Ukitake warned, and Uryuu nodded.

“I wasn’t going to attack him.” He assured the Captain frankly. “I’m a Quincy. To fight a battle relying wholly on Shinigami power would be a betrayal of who I am and what my Grandfather taught me to do. It’s all right, Ukitake-san. I don’t intend on attacking him. I just… you told Kurosaki that you thought all the research notes should be destroyed. And I think… between us… Hassuiryou and I might be able to take care of that.”

Ukitake’s eyes widened for a moment, then realisation flooded his expression and he smiled, nodding his head.

“I see.” He murmured. “So you have reached that kind of understanding, have you? Very well, then. If you feel that way, I won’t prevent you.”

He cast the dumbstruck Kira a glance.

“When the matter is resolved, Kira, Ishida-kun will return the sword to you.” He said evenly. “I will re-seal its *reiryoku* myself, to ensure it can’t cause any further harm. Then you can give it to the Sou Taichou and your mission will be completed successfully. Is that all right with you?”

Kira stared at him for a moment, then slowly bowed his head.

“Yes, Taichou.” He murmured. “If that’s what you’ve decided.”

“Ishida-kun, if you come with me, it must be *just* you.” Ukitake got carefully to his feet. “Abarai, Ichigo-kun and Inoue-san must stay here. Kira, if you’d remain here too, for the time being. Sentarou and Kiyone are likely both exhausted from running around after me these past few days, so I’d appreciate it if you could spare a moment to help them put 13-Bantai in proper order this morning. I understand, after all, that 3-Bantai are feeling much more content with themselves at present?”

“Kuchiki-taichou has helped out, and I made sure they were all assigned manoeuvres before I left the barracks this morning.” Kira looked surprised. “If you want me to help out, sir, I don’t mind at all. After all, till this duty is discharged, I should be on hand to take possession of the sword at a moment’s notice, and I don’t think many of my men want it returning to 3-Bantai after their previous experiences.”

“I can see why not.” Ukitake agreed. “Very well, then. Pass my thoughts to Abarai too, if you would. If he has energy to expel and doesn’t want to return to his own Captain just at present, I’m sure there are plenty of junior officers here who he can whip into fighting shape while he waits.”

“Taichou!”

At that moment the door slid back again, revealing a breathless Sentarou, and Ukitake cast him a surprised glance.

“What is it, Sentarou? I was about to go next door to speak to Kurotsuchi — is it important?”

“Kuchiki has reported back to the squad barracks, sir.” Sentarou gabbled. “She said that Kuchiki-taichou gave her leave to come… should she report to you, or…?”

Ukitake’s lips twitched into a rueful smile.

“Well, that is surprising, but somewhat heart-warming nonetheless.” He murmured. “So Byakuya’s entrusting me with her safety again, I see, even at this point. Very well, Sentarou. Tell Kuchiki that she’s to join Abarai, Ichigo-kun and Inoue-san and that none of them are to leave 13-Bantai until I return to speak to them directly. Understand? I don’t want any violent occurrences if they can be avoided. Kira will help with the squad, too, if you and Kiyone have other administrative matters to catch up with… and you can ask Abarai to assist you as well, if you feel so inclined. I’m grateful to the

both of you for your constant attentiveness of late — but I know that there must be many things that have backed up due to my ill health, and they must be seen to as well."

"Yes, sir." Sentarou bowed his head. "I'll pass your message on at once, sir."

With that he was gone, and Ukitake cast Uryuu a glance.

"Well?" He said softly. "I think you should retrieve your sword, Ishida-kun. It's time to go.

"I still don't understand why we have to stay here."

Ichigo dropped down discontentedly onto the floor, crossing his legs and leaning up against the wall of the chamber as he let out a disgruntled sigh. "I came to Soul Society to help Ishida in the first place, didn't I? An' it's not like this hasn't pissed off a shitload of people. Why's Ukitake-san all for handlin' it himself all of a sudden? That Kurotsuchi dude wants puttin' in place good an' proper, considerin' what he's done to folk here there an' everywhere."

"I guess Ukitake-san knows what he's doing." Orihime hugged her knees to her chest, looking pensive. "I think we should let him talk to Kurotsuchi-san, Kurosaki-kun. Maybe it can all be worked out that way, after all, without anyone having to fight anyone else any more."

"I bet you didn't feel that way when you were locked up in that jerk's confinement cell." Ichigo muttered, and Orihime sighed.

"No, nor when he wanted to hurt Ishida-kun." She admitted. "But… Ishida-kun *is* all right, isn't he? Now, I mean. And it all worked out okay. Besides, Ukitake-san knows more than we do about Shizuki-san and what happened to him. It makes sense, somehow, if he's the one who deals with it."

"Personally, I'm with Ichigo." Renji sprawled back against the wood with a grunt. "As if I don't have enough work to do without added hassles. First he lays out one of my buddies without any good reason… then he starts messin' around with you guys who 6-Bantai are s'posed to help keep out of shit, an' *then* he manages to get Rukia knocked out an' my Captain up in a tizzy about the whole business. My ears are gonna be buzzin' with the Taichou's pointed lack of complaints over the next few weeks, I'm tellin' you."

"How can your ears buzz with a lack of complaints? Renji, you're talkin' shit again." Ichigo grimaced at him, and Renji snorted.

“You really don’t know my Captain that well, then.” He muttered. “Trust me. It can happen. You try dealin’ with angry reiatsu an’ no communication an’ see how it makes *you* feel, day in day out.”

“Nii-sama isn’t as angry as all that.” Rukia put in at that moment from her corner. “If he had been, he wouldn’t have let me leave the manor house this morning.”

“Yeah, how *did* you manage that?” Ichigo eyed her keenly. “Byakuya sure didn’t look like he wanted t’discuss it, yesterday. I ain’t seen him so ticked as that since our fight.”

“Well, I’m not really hurt.” Rukia shrugged. “A little bruised, that’s all. Besides, we talked about it and I think he understood that I like to finish the things I start. Even if finishing it right now seems like sitting around listening to you and Renji clash egos and tempers like restrained schoolboys burning for a fight…”

“If you’re going to spew shit like that, you can go back.” Renji glared at her, and Orihime smiled.

“I’m glad you were all right, Kuchiki-san.” She said sincerely. “I felt like it was my fault you got hurt.”

“None of it is your fault, Inoue.” Rukia shook her head. “Nor Ishida’s, really.”

“Ukitake-san took Ishida with him to 13-Bantai, didn’t he.” Ichigo looked thoughtful, and Renji nodded.

“An’ he has Kira helpin’ the squad here, while Kiyone an’ Sentarou sort out their admin.” He agreed lazily. “I might go an’ join him, in a minute. Beats sittin’ on my ass doin’ nothing, anyway. I could do that in my own barracks.”

“Not with Nii-sama around.” Rukia said astutely, and Renji laughed ruefully.

“True.” He admitted. “Though it doesn’t sound from what you said like he’ll be too pissed with me for comin’ here an’ stayin’ involved in all this. Not if you are, too.”

“I don’t think he’s cross with you at all.” Rukia looked surprised. “He seemed to be quite happy that you’d come — he’d just decided to stay out of it.”

“Maybe because of something Ukitake-san said.” Ichigo pursed his lips. “The way he reacted…”

“He mentioned my sister, and Nii-sama doesn’t like to talk about

her at all." Rukia said gravely. "There are still a lot of things he hasn't told me about her, yet, and I know he's not ready to break that silence. That's all."

"Ukitake-san said that Byakuya and Shizuki were the same in that they'd both lost someone they'd loved dearly." Ichigo remembered, and Rukia nodded.

"I think that's most of all why Nii-sama's pulled out." She agreed. "Because he sees the parallel too. And it's brought back memories… so he's keeping his distance."

"It must be sad for him." Orihime reflected softly. "To have lost someone he really loved like that."

"I didn't even know Taichou had had a wife, till recently." Renji admitted. "There are parts of the squad buildin' that he's never let me enter, an' it's not a subject he talks about much. He's only… once, he's mentioned it to me directly. But that was in context of… of other things. So I guess it won't happen again. He's the kinda guy who shuts off shit he doesn't like an' jus' doesn't think about them at all, if you ask me. He probably is more mad about havin' been reminded of it."

"Other things?" Ichigo blinked, and Renji shook his head, looking uncomfortable.

"Squad business. None o' yours." He said gruffly.

Orihime twisted her hands together pensively.

"Ishida-kun… really *is* going to be all right now, isn't he?" She murmured. "He seemed all right. Last night, I mean… even if he was tired. I mean, he didn't say much, and he looked really… thoughtful a lot of the time we were all talking. But even so…"

"Sounds like normal Ishida t'me." Renji mused, but Ichigo shook his head.

"No, he ain't quite normal Ishida." He admitted. "Yesterday he was speakin' to that *zanpakutou* — properly, I mean, with it released an' all. An' I'll bet you whatever you like that it ain't in his chamber now. Kira came t'get it back, didn't he? But he's still here, as though he's *waitin'* to get it an' finish his duty. I reckon Ishida's taken it with him t'see Kurotsuchi. He said himself that his soul an' that Shizuki dude's are still connected in some way right now — I s'pose he's gotta get it out of his system his own way."

"But… do you think he'll *fight* against Kurotsuchi-san?" Orihime's eyes widened, and Ichigo shook his head.

“I don’t think that Ukitake-san would let him.” He said shrewdly. “Let’s be straight about this, Inoue. That old dude walked right into a full scale battle yesterday, even with wobbly health, an’ he didn’t bat an eyelid when Byakuya practically threatened to wave Senbonzakura in his face. On the contrary, he put Byakuya in his place like he was nothin’ more’n a spoilt schoolkid — an’ he did it without even raisin’ his voice. Do you think that, even with Shizuki’s *reiryoku*, Ishida could stand up against that? Tuberculosis or not, Ukitake-san’s one kickass Shinigami. I didn’t realise it before, but I damn well realise it now.”

“I’ve never seen him release his sword.” Renji rubbed his chin pensively. “But even so, he has a lot of respect among the Gotei-13.”

“I’ve seen it.” Rukia reflected. “But he doesn’t use it unless he has to. That’s the kind of Captain he is, I suppose. I wouldn’t worry about Ishida, Inoue. There’s no way Ukitake-taichou will let him do anything he shouldn’t with that sword.”

“Well?”

As they crossed the forecourt of 12-Bantai, Ukitake paused, casting Uryuu a questioning look. “We’re here. I know you have a lot of anger about the whole situation, Ishida-kun — but I’m trusting you to keep to what you said in my office. That you don’t intend to use that sword to attack him. I don’t want a violent scene, after all.”

“I don’t intend to do that.” Uryuu assured him. “I swear, Ukitake-san. On… on my Quincy pride, if that helps. I won’t use the sword that way. It’s not what Hassuiryou wants, either… and besides, after having seen in graphic detail what happened to Ametatsu-san because he let his anger take control of his common sense… I don’t think I’ve ever felt less inclined to kill Kurotsuchi. Although I do have issues to settle with him…”

His eyes narrowed.

“Today won’t be that day.” He said frankly. “To be honest, I just want to end this and go back home, now.”

“Good.” Ukitake smiled. “Then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll settle this with as little fuss as possible. All right? Our objective is to ensure the research into this matter — and into you — stops. That’s our priority in all of this.”

“I know.” Uryuu agreed.

He paused for a moment, eying the Captain pensively, then,

“This is my problem, really.” He said softly. “Not yours, Ukitake-san. I should be the one to deal with it. Will you let me, please?”

“Deal with…” Ukitake stared, then, “My boy, do you realise how much of this is down to my decisions made two hundred years ago? Believe me, if it’s anyone’s affair, it’s mine to resolve. You don’t have to take it all on yourself — what happened at 6-Bantai was far more my fault in many many ways than it was yours.”

“I don’t see how.” Uryuu frowned. “You trained Ametatsu-san, but you didn’t teach him to kill anyone.”

“No, but I did ensure his soul was able to be reborn.” Ukitake said heavily. “And I did have his *reiryoku* sealed, not severed completely. If I hadn’t done those things…”

“If you hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here.” Uryuu said soberly. “And I wouldn’t be able to fight as a Quincy, most probably, if the *reiryoku* had been severed completely.”

His eyes narrowed in resolution.

“Please, Ukitake-san.” He said softly. “I know you want to help your former colleague, but this is about me too, here and now. Ametatsu-san doesn’t have control of my mind now, even if I have his memories and I’m holding his sword. It might sound stupid to you, but I’m fed up of being used and manipulated by outside forces. A lot is said about Quincy pride, but our clan live and die by that value more strongly than any other. Our pride in our people, our actions, our families, our ability to protect those around us. I’ve been far too easily pushed and poked around of late, and I don’t like it. It grates and feels wrong. So… I want to speak to Kurotsuchi. I want to settle this. Please.”

Ukitake sighed.

“I will have to speak to him, too. If this is to be prevented from becoming a huge incident before 1-Bantai, there’s no other option.” He said slowly. “But I understand your feelings. And I have nothing against the Quincy’s code of pride. By all means say what you need to say. I’ll trust your intentions, and be there to back you up when the time comes.”

Relief flooded Uryuu’s heart at this, and he nodded, his grip tightening on the sword in his left hand.

“Thank you.” He said sincerely, as they set off across the courtyard towards the entrance to the laboratory. “I appreciate it.”

“You know, Shizuki also held the weapon in his left hand.” Ukitake observed as they reached the door. “There really are little bits and pieces about him which you have too, even if you are very different.”

“I don’t know enough about swords to know if it’s designed to be that way or not.” Uryuu admitted. “But it seemed natural. I’ve always been left-handed… I guess you’re right. He was and so am I.”

He placed his right hand against the door, hesitating, then,

“Here goes nothing.” He murmured.

With that he gathered his courage, slipping into the darkened room beyond.

“Well, this is a nice surprise, isn’t it, Nemu?” The scientist’s sinister tones echoed out from the furthest corner of the chamber as Kurotsuchi wheeled his chair around to face his visitor, a wide grin on his face. “And I would have thought this would be the last place you’d come. Or are you here for revenge of some sort, Quincy boy? There’s a look of particular determination on your face… I quite like it, you know.”

His eyes twinkled maliciously.

“It’s a look of a proud Quincy about to right a wrong.” He said sardonically, getting to his feet. “Although what wrong that could be I can’t imagine.”

“No, I bet you can’t, considering how twisted you are.” Uryuu muttered. “So you did know I was coming, even though I’ve been concealing my reiatsu since I left 13-Bantai.”

“My boy, I know when you breathe in and out, thanks to my technology.” Kurotsuchi patted the data bank proudly. “Every single one of your recent blips, adventures and developments has been carefully observed and noted, after all. You’ve proven fascinating from start to finish. I’m so glad that you didn’t succumb to my poison the first time we fought. We’d have been deprived all this fun.”

He extended a thin arm towards the teenager, beckoning for him to enter properly.

“So to what do I owe the honour?” He asked softly, faint derision in his expression. “Did you come to give me more study data into the spirit patterns of Shizuki’s *reiryoku*? Well, I’m afraid to say that study is over with now. I’ve gleaned everything possible for the time being. I know that you’re not a fit specimen to truly wield the power of a Captain level Shinigami — but I shouldn’t have expected you to be.

After all, in the end, you are just a human born Quincy. And more, a powerless failure at even being that. I will need to find a better host the next time. It seems weak human souls are no match for spirit power of that level, after all."

His eyes narrowed, glittering with amusement.

"Perhaps I should have spent the time examining your young friend instead." He said, his tones smooth and taunting Uryuu's pride with every word he spoke. "It seems that, after all, *Kurosaki Ichigo* is the only one who's a true exception to that rule… I'm sure I'd have got far more satisfactory results from *him* than from a pathetic specimen like you. In the end, it seems, the Quincy aren't worth very much at all — despite all that fierce pride."

Uryuu bristled, indignation surging inside of him at this deliberate insult to both his power and his people, but he kept a hand on his temper, shaking his head as he faced the Captain stonily.

"I haven't come here to fall into your trap and attack you, so you have a reason to study me further." He said quietly. "You've manipulated me enough — and my friends, too. I came here to put an end to it, that's all."

"Such powerful words." Kurotsuchi leant back against the wall of his lab, folding his arms across his chest in amusement. "It's fascinating to me, you know, how the more feeble a Quincy becomes, the more strident his resolve. But in the end, that is all you are. Just a Quincy. Nothing else. My interest in you is already fading — I would leave here, if I were you, before I decide you're a waste of cell space and eliminate you completely."

"I'm not afraid of you. I told you that before." Uryuu raised his weapon, resting the blade gently against the fingers of his right hand as he glanced at his companion frostily. "And I'm not going to be intimidated or threatened into running and hiding. If you've studied Quincy, you know we don't do that. Whatever you think of our pride, it's too precious a thing for us to abandon, no matter what the situation. And I wouldn't run away from a mere *Shinigami*."

His lip curled.

"Particularly one like *you*."

"Heh." Kurotsuchi seemed amused by this, tut-tutting softly under his breath. "It seems that, even without any *reiryoku* to speak of, the boy still has spirit befitting the last of his clan, Nemu. It's such a shame I'm already bored with the Quincy. I don't have room for

another confined specimen, not when I know everything I already need to know about that particular race. And now, thanks to yesterday's experiment…"

He reached out to pat the mainframe again,

"I have all the data on Shizuki Ametatsu's tragic soul, too. You can't change that, Ishida-kun. All the strong words in the world aren't going to sway me from my purpose. This is progress, after all."

"You call it progress?" Anger sparked in Uryuu's heart at this. "To make a dead man suffer the things he suffered two hundred years ago? To put him through the things that drove him to his death then, just so you can see what happens when you tweak this or press that button? That's not progress! That's your own twisted interests and nothing else!"

"Maybe, maybe not." Kurotsuchi seemed unconcerned. "But either way, there's nothing you can do about it. That weapon in your hand is dead. And Shizuki Ametatsu's reiatsu is no longer surging through your aura. You're powerless to do anything — and if you're just going to rant and rave, I'd ask you to leave. I have other work to do, after all, and you are no longer needed. Your case is closed, Ishida-kun. Leave, or I'll have Nemu forcibly escort you outside."

His eyes became no more than slits, as he met the Quincy's defiance coolly.

"You are, after all, trespassing on my territory."

"I told you. I'm not leaving until I do what I came here to do. And I'm not as powerless as you think I am, Kurotsuchi."

Ishida's eyes narrowed, his grip tightening on Hassuiryou's hilt as he felt the faint hum of the weapon's consciousness flicker and spread across his touch. Resolve hardened inside of him, and Kurotsuchi's expression became one of disbelief as the Quincy ran his fingers gently along the surface of the blade, the silvery metal glimmering with light as if in answer to his touch.

"*Fure, Hassuiryou*." He murmured, and as the azure glow became stronger, Hassuiryou's blue guard spread and curled into its wing-like shape, the blade becoming fluid as water pooling on the ground.

"Don't be reckless." Kurotsuchi gathered his wits. "That is *not* your weapon, boy. It belongs to one that's dead inside of you… and you can't utilise it without allowing his spirit to command you once more."

A cold smirk crept up the corners of his mouth.

“It’s a nice try, but you know it as well as I do. *Shizuki Ametatsu* is the one who trained with that sword.” He added derisively. “In comparison you are a baby just learning to walk. You have no control over either its Shikai or its Bankai forms. Perhaps you have found enough scattered *reiryoku* to manage a basic release — but that is only because of the *reiryoku* your body absorbed from Seireitei’s atmosphere. None of it is your power. And you will not be able to command that blade.”

Uryuu’s eyes became steely and cold.

“Do you think so?” He asked softly, and Kurotsuchi’s amber eyes narrowed.

“I *know* so.” He said archly. “You are a Quincy. You have no understanding of *zanpakutou.* Do you really think you can kill me, with a borrowed sword and stolen spirit power?”

Uryuu smiled icily, shaking his head.

“I didn’t come here to kill you, so that’s immaterial.” He said dismissively. “It’s a pointless question which doesn’t need to be answered. If and when I fight you again, after all, it will be as a Quincy, not like this.”

“Then what do you think you’re going to do with that toy of yours?” Kurotsuchi was mocking. “Wave it around prettily so it catches the light?”

“Not exactly.” Uryuu glanced at the blade, seeing his reflection vaguely glimmering in the watery surface. “You see, Hassuiryou isn’t my sword. But he and I, we have reached an understanding. He’s not happy, either, with the way you’ve used his master’s spirit to further your own ends. And nor am I happy that I’ve been your guinea pig. So in that our ends are the same. It turns out your reasoning is flawed logic after all.”

“Meaning?”

“I can speak to this *zanpakutou*.” Uryuu said coolly, even as he instinctively shifted the weapon into a more horizontal position, almost echoing the spiritual bow he had fought with so many times before.. “Because of your experimentation, Kurotsuchi, I can speak to Hassuiryou. Even as I am now, I can call his name and he will respond. Because I have Ametatsu-san’s *reiryoku*, I can use that power. And because I understand, now, what that rapport means… I won’t be taken over by that dead soul again. Hassuiryou isn’t reacting because

Ametatsu-san's telling him to. He's reacting because I'm asking him to."

He smiled.

"Are you satisfied with the fruits of your research?" He asked lightly. "Because the experiment is truly about to end."

His eyes narrowed, and he drew his right hand over the glimmering blade.

"*Ryuu no Baratsuki.*" He said levelly, and Kurotsuchi's eyes widened as the blade scattered into thousands of tiny shards, dancing like glittering raindrops within the laboratory. Uryuu's smile became predatory, and he flung out his right hand purposefully in the direction of Kurotsuchi's mainframe.

"I think it's time that data was destroyed, for everyone's sake." He said frankly, as the splinters of metal swung around to follow his gesture, piercing through the thick shell of the computer hard drive and sending fizzes of smoke and sparks of electrical energy up into the air as they broke through the casing beneath, splitting cables and drenching the circuitboards as they burrowed through to the ground below.

"What are you doing!" Kurotsuchi was beside himself, his former sly composure completely shattered by the unexpectedness of the Quincy's attack, and Uryuu's eyes twinkled with triumph.

"I told you. Ending your experiment." He said calmly. "So that Ametatsu-san and Hassuiryou can once more rest in peace. And that I can go home, dammit, and focus on being a Quincy again."

"I think that it's for the best, Kurotsuchi." At that moment Ukitake stepped out of the shadows, a genial smile on his sallow features as he met his colleague's dumbstruck gaze with a pleasant one of his own, and from the consternation in Kurotsuchi's features Uryuu realised that the other Captain had had absolutely no idea that Ukitake was there. He smiled, taking a certain malicious amount of pleasure from this fact. Kurotsuchi had, after all, incriminated himself enough already, and although he had somehow managed to see through Uryuu's own cloaking, he had not been able to break down the superior spirit blocking of his experienced next door neighbour. In that one instant the two Gotei leaders had met gazes, Uryuu had seen a flurry of different emotions rush through Kurotsuchi's often callous amber eyes — horror, anger, disbelief, resentment, and perhaps, for the very briefest of flashes, there had been a flicker of alarm.

Uryuu cast Ukitake a sidelong glance. The 13-Bantai Captain had not stepped into the chamber with any particularly prepossessing reiatsu, and it was clear that he had not come with confrontation on his mind. Yet even so, at the sight of him, Kurotsuchi's self-possessed demeanour had all but changed, and Uryuu's eyes narrowed as he digested it.

So, despite his ill-health and his deceptively gentle appearance, Ukitake Juushirou was a Captain of a level that not even a twisted opportunist like Kurotsuchi liked to cross.

He pursed his lips, storing this information for future reference.

"Ukitake!" Oblivious to the Quincy's thought processes, Kurotsuchi finally found his voice, and across the chamber Uryuu saw Nemu cast a glance between her master and the other Captain, her expression resigned as she took in their expressions. So she knew it too, then. That this was a lost fight, even before Kurotsuchi had begun to defend himself.

"I felt it was time we had a talk, Kurotsuchi." Ukitake said evenly, casting his colleague a genial smile. "It seems that Kira Izuru from 3-Bantai has recovered a good deal of his memory from the night that his squad were attacked. He's quite prepared to make a report on the matter to the Sou Taichou — however, I thought it would be far more productive for everyone if he allowed me to discuss the matter with you on a more level, unofficial basis. After all, Soul Society has suffered enough in recent weeks. I don't think we need to be pointing fingers at one another as we work towards the Winter battle — now do we?"

"What are you…" Kurotsuchi's eyes almost fell out of his head, and Ukitake's smile widened.

"You *do* agree, don't you, that this experiment is at an end?" He asked lightly, and Kurotsuchi's eyes glittered with frustrated rage as he registered the damage to his precious equipment.

"Have you any idea how long it will take to fix that?" He demanded, seemingly recovering his wits as his anger took control.

"Some time, hopefully, so it will keep you occupied and out of my way." Uryuu raised his hand, recalling the shards of metal back into a complete blade. "But just to be on the safe side…"

He cast his hand forward again, and obediently the fragments shot once more across the laboratory, piercing through the computer shell a second time as further crackles and hisses marked the complete

demise of the unit. A satisfied smile crossed the Quincy's face as he drew back the splinters again, Hassuiryou glowing and shimmering at his side as if eager to launch once more into the fray.

"Kurotsuchi?" Ukitake cast his colleague a questioning look, and glancing at him Uryuu saw there was something else in the man's normally gentle brown eyes — something steely and purposeful which explained in an instant why he had been a Captain for so long and how he had managed to obtain so much respect during that time.

Kurotsuchi growled, and Ukitake smiled.

"Shall I take that as agreement?" He asked softly. "Shall I tell Kira-fukutaichou that the matter has been resolved amicably and the stolen item in question retrieved with no adverse effects?"

"Ukitake, you…"

"Kurotsuchi, this is not a negotiation." Ukitake's voice suddenly lost all its humour. "You placed an innocent human boy in great jeopardy of his life. You almost managed to cause the death of 3-Bantai's current Lieutenant-in-Charge and, most of all, you almost set loose a very dangerous force within the bounds of Seireitei. These are all serious matters for which considerable evidence exists, and matters which, considering recent events, I doubt the Sou Taichou would look favourably upon."

Kurotsuchi's eyes narrowed to glittering slits, and Uryuu could see the tension coursing through his body as he weighed up his options.

So that's it, after all. He knows that he's cornered, and that Ukitake-san's being here is the proof of it. It's not that he's afraid of Ukitake-san, exactly. But he's afraid of people interfering with his work here. That's what this is about. He doesn't want the Sou Taichou to take away his toys.

Uryuu's lip curled in derision.

It would serve him right, though, if he did.

"Urahara told me himself about the nature of your experimentation into dormant soul matter." Ukitake continued slowly. "And I think that, while I understand the reasons it first began, it's time such a matter was shelved. We've all seen for ourselves that it carries several adverse side effects — and very few benefits. The dead are dead. We, of all people, should understand that best of all."

"So you think that, if you destroy all of my research and threaten me behind closed doors, I'll somehow be grateful for your intervention?" Kurotsuchi spat out. "When you're standing in the way

of scientific progress, and preventing us from learning more about the rubbish we throw out into Seireitei's atmosphere? What if it had been *Aizen* who had done it, with his experimentations? Doubtless the aftershock of his tests have been severe. What is wrong with my doing tests of my own? At least in my case I am not acting against Soul Society! Whatever you think about it, *I* am not a traitor."

Ukitake sighed, slowly shaking his head.

"I know that." He said wearily, and Uryuu started, staring at the older Captain in surprise. "I realise that at the base of all of this is a wish to make Soul Society stronger. That is the reason I want us to settle it this way, and not report it any higher. But I am serious, Kurotsuchi. Your desire for progress and discovery shouldn't be at the cost of your comrades or of innocent lives. Kira Izuru is lucky not to have suffered permanent effects from your intoxicating gas. And as for Ishida-kun…"

"He should be grateful to me, because I at least gave him some way of fighting back." Kurotsuchi muttered, and Uryuu shook his head.

"No you didn't. You made me your psycho puppet and pulled strings to make me attack people I didn't need to." He said coldly. "*Hassuiryou* is the one who gave me anything. You just wanted to play with me. Hassuiryou's wanted to help me. That's the difference."

"*Hassuiryou*?" Kurotsuchi snorted. "A dead man's sword?"

"Whatever *reiryoku* Ishida-kun has or doesn't have at present, this isn't the right way to restore his power." Ukitake shook his head. "Kurotsuchi, tell me honestly, please. Is this the only place where files on this research topic were stored?"

Kurotsuchi stared at him, and for a moment Uryuu thought he wasn't going to answer. Then the steeliness returned to Ukitake's gaze, and the clown-like Captain cursed, flouncing down into his chair.

"Yes, damn you all." He muttered. "Nemu and I hadn't had a chance to duplicate the results of our experiment over. Thanks to you, all of that data is lost, now."

"Well, at least you got to see what Shizuki Ametatsu's *zanpakutou* could do at close range." Uryuu said pettily, and Kurotsuchi glowered at him from under lowered lids.

"Then our business here is done." Ukitake decided. "You needn't worry, Kurotsuchi. I will instruct Kira Izuru and any others who know of this that the matter is closed and the business at an end. After all, come the Winter, we will need your power as surely as mine and

others will be needed. And, Ishida-kun, perhaps yours too.”

“If there’s a way to find it.” Uryuu bit his lip. “But maybe there is. And if there is, I’ll try.”

Author’s Note

Sorry to anyone who thought Ishida was going to pulverise Kurotsuchi with Hassuiryou. That was never going to happen at any point in the story — the message was never about that, really. Perhaps, given Ametatsu’s past, it’s the opposite. In the end, not everything has to be settled with violence. And, to be truthful, I can’t imagine Ishida knowingly wanting to fight against a Shinigami with Shinigami powers. As a proud Quincy, he’d see that as a sell-out. That confrontation can wait until he’s properly regained his strength, after all.

Plus there was no way in hell I was going to write about that twisted clown’s ugly, sick zanpakutou. ***Not a chance***!

Chapter Twenty Seven: Closing The Book

Chapter Twenty Seven: Closing The Book

"You know, even though I've seen that sword released countless times, I don't think I've ever seen it used quite like that."

As they made their way slowly back towards 13-Bantai, Ukitake cast Uryuu a grin. "It may be Shizuki's sword, but in a way I think today you used it as though it was yours a little — didn't you?"

"I don't have much power to do anything else with it than what I did." Uryuu looked sheepish. "In the end, Kurotsuchi is right. I'm a Quincy and I don't understand *zanpakutou*. But I do know how to fire a bow, and when I do that, how to aim the shards of spirit power to their best advantage. In a way, *Ryuu no Baratsuki* is something like that. True, it's a sword and not a bow. But even so…"

"You used what you knew to activate Hassuiryou's sleeping power?"

"I suppose so." Uryuu shrugged. "I do have Ametatsu-san's memories still, too. Some of them are blurry and disjointed, but not all of them. Maybe in the end they helped too… I don't know."

"It's somewhat nostalgic to see Hassuiryou alive again." Ukitake admitted, a sad expression crossing his features. "I was very fond of Shizuki, despite his faults. Well, I have a tendency to be fond of all those who come into my squad. Sometimes that fondness pays off — and sometimes it causes more pain than it does pleasure. But seeing you today, releasing the blade… I think I did make the right decisions two hundred years ago. Even if I couldn't save his life… I'm glad what I decided to do has helped you to at least have yours."

"Mm." Uryuu glanced at the sword, now once more sealed in its dormant form, then he nodded. "Some of the memories I have… you're in them, Ukitake-san. Ametatsu-san… he was fond of you, too."

He reddened, looking awkward.

"I think… he saw you… as a father figure, almost." He murmured, embarrassment clear in his features. "Because he'd never had anyone, really, until he joined 13-Bantai."

Ukitake stared for a moment, then he laughed.

“I see.” He said thoughtfully. “We did work together for a long time, after all. And it’s been said before, you know… that I treat my subordinates more like family than military, from time to time.”

“You helped him to train Hassuiryou, I know that.” Uryuu nodded, his cheeks returning to their normal colour as he did so. “But… when he came back here, after… after what he did, he came to 13-Bantai, didn’t he? To see you.”

“Yes, he did.” Ukitake’s expression clouded. “I’ve always regretted not being able to prevent him leaving again that night, to be truthful. If you remember that, you know what passed between us — and what his intentions were. And I wasn’t able to stop him.”

Uryuu was silent for a moment, then, slowly, he shook his head.

“Ametatsu-san wasn’t mad.” He said thoughtfully. “But he was… out of control. He knew it, too. And I think… it scared him. What he’d done. What he’d become. That’s why he wanted to die. Because he’d done something he couldn’t forgive himself for. Not even though he’d done it for her sake.”

“Yes, I think so, too.” Ukitake sighed. “Because I knew the lad, I probably knew better than anyone that what happened was out of character. He’d put up with a lot, growing up in Rukongai. He’d had to deal with prejudice and taunting all through his training because of it, and even from fellow Captains when he took the *haori* and became leader of 10-Bantai. Yet he didn’t walk into fights he didn’t consider worth his time. Mostly he ignored it. He just worked twice as hard to prove he could outpace those people. That’s how he became a Captain in the first place… because of how hard he worked.”

He shrugged.

“Perhaps I was soft on him, in some ways, but the Gotei-13 were more or less his whole life by the time he left my squad and took charge of his own.” He continued wistfully. “He was sad to leave, but excited about it, too. He was… a very good Captain, Ishida-kun. He would have been… a credit to Soul Society.”

“Until he got involved with my ancestors and fell in love.” Uryuu murmured, and Ukitake nodded.

“Love is a strange thing.” He reflected. “That it can dominate and distort the things we do in so many ways.”

At this he cast Uryuu a keen glance, and Uryuu stared up at him in confusion.

“Ukitake-san?”

“It’s not escaped my notice, that you chose yourself a Niji.” Ukitake said softly, and Uryuu’s face became scarlet once more as he interpreted the meaning behind the other’s remarks.

“Inoue-san is my friend, that’s all!”

“Perhaps.” Ukitake nodded. “But there’s no doubt in my mind that Shizuki confused her with his lost love because your own affections lean that way. Whether or not Inoue-san is or isn’t like the real Niji wasn’t an issue, in the end. How *you* viewed her was far stronger than how she looked.”

“It’s not like that.” Uryuu dropped his gaze, kicking absently at the dusty ground. “Inoue-san likes Kurosaki. A blind idiot could see that a mile away — or read it in her reiatsu every time she’s around him. But…”

“But?”

“Hassuiryou said that even if she was only my ally and my friend… she was someone I would fight to protect.” Uryuu said honestly. “And he’s right. I would. No matter what the situation.”

He bit his lip, surprised by his own frankness.

“I… don’t usually talk like this.” He said softly. “I suppose it’s *his* fault, isn’t it? *He* confided things in you, didn’t he? Now he’s making me do it. Please, Ukitake-san, I don’t want you to get the wrong idea…”

“I don’t imagine that I will.” Ukitake said simply. “It’s true that Shizuki did often confide in me, as you put it — sought my advice as his senior officer.”

He grinned.

“Well, perhaps I’m not the obvious choice for *you* to talk to, being that we aren’t as well acquainted in this lifetime as the last.” He acknowledged. “But it’s not a weakness, you know, to trust other people. Not if you’re sure they’re on your side.”

“I suppose… I do know that you’re that.” Uryuu eyed Ukitake pensively. “Even if you *are* a Shinigami. And Ametatsu-san knew it, too. That’s why he came to see you over everyone else.”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“It’s… not so easy for me to give my trust.” He said at length. “It never has been and I don’t expect to change it, either, even when all

of this is over. I'm not good with people, after all. Hassuiryou said my soul was complicated, and I think… he's probably right."

"But you *do* trust Inoue-san, I think?"

"Yes… I suppose I do." Uryuu admitted honestly. "How I see her… it's not as simple as you think it is — and I don't think I'm quite as reckless as Ametatsu-san was. But then… I *did* fight Kurotsuchi in the first place because he wanted to hurt her. So… maybe there are bits of me that are like him, after all."

"You didn't kill Kurotsuchi, even though you could have done." Ukitake shook his head. "You've learnt the lesson Shizuki left behind."

"Maybe." Uryuu nodded, his cheeks returning once more to their original shade as he digested this. "I thought Ametatsu-san was a crazy person — a bad person — when this began. But I don't think that way now. He doesn't seem… quite like that. He lost control because he lost his heart to Niji, but he also fought to defend my family from someone who shouldn't have done what he did. And I don't think that he was a murderer, in the end. I think… I think he just did what he had to do, for the sake of his pride. And… and hers."

"And the Quincy's, perhaps?" Ukitake's eyes glittered with humour, and Uryuu smiled ruefully.

"Probably, considering he ended up this way." He admitted. "I minded a lot, before, when I knew I'd been a Shinigami in the past. But *this* Shinigami… I think it's all right. He wasn't an enemy. He was on *our* side."

"I think, sometimes, that there's a lot of hope in seeing a Quincy and a Shinigami fight side by side." Ukitake reflected. "Even though it failed then, I don't think it failed in the long run. You and Ichigo-kun are proof of that. That the two can come together when the need is great enough."

"Hrm." Uryuu pushed his glasses back on his nose. "I don't know about that. Sometimes he drives me crazy."

"But all great friendships are founded that way." Ukitake said comfortably. "Because when you can see the annoying habits in people, it means you're probably seeing them as they are. And if you see them as they are, you can trust them entirely."

Uryuu's eyes widened, and Ukitake laughed.

"Perhaps I'm getting old after all." He observed. "But it gives me a good deal of comfort, either way, knowing that you two are fighting

on the same side."

"Well, I guess in the end there's still a little bit of me that's tainted by the Shinigami in my past." Uryuu said wryly. "While his memories are still floating round my head, it's sort of hard to ignore. But then, it's not all bad. Because of some of those memories, after all, I guess I was able to figure out how he activated his sword in the first place. And I was able to talk to Hassuiryou, too. I've never really been curious about *zanpakutou* or what their power is comprised of — and I don't know if I'll ever really be interested in it again, after this. But even so…"

"Shizuki's memories *will* be resealed, Ishida-kun. You know that, I hope? In order to keep within the regulations of Soul Society and all of those long dead matters… he must be returned to his former state."

"I know. And I think it's right that way." Uryuu nodded. "I don't want to live with his regrets always on my shoulders. So it's all right, Ukitake-san. I won't try and stop you — or anyone — from removing those memories from me."

"You might not forget everything so easily, however." Ukitake reached down to touch Hassuiryou's hilt. "This sword is not just a weapon, now. You know that better than you did before. It has physical form as a sword, but it is a part of your soul, too. You understand that, don't you? That even when Hassuiryou is sealed and Shizuki gone, both of them will still be within you, somewhere. Otherwise none of this could ever have come about."

Uryuu looked wistful.

"To be honest, that's the only thing I'll miss." He said honestly. 'I thought him annoying to begin with, but it's a shame that Quincy fight so often alone. The bow… it isn't the same. It doesn't have it's own spirit. We fight through our own will and spirit. But… if I'd listened to Hassuiryou from the start, I wouldn't have got into so much trouble. So maybe there's something to be said for the Shinigami way of fighting, after all. Don't tell Kurosaki I said that!' He added hurriedly. "But between us… Ukitake-san, I think I might miss Hassuiryou."

Ukitake smiled, amusement lighting up his sallow features.

"I won't say a word about it." He promised solemnly. "But I'm glad if it means you've come to understand our way of things, even just a little bit. It means that none of this has gone to waste. And the truth is, you know, you might be a Quincy now, but the Quincy are human and they have a finite life."

“Meaning?” Uryuu looked startled.

“One day, when your life in the Real World is over, I wouldn’t be surprised to see you manifest similar powers in Soul Society.” Ukitake said lightly. “Not the same, of course — noone but Shizuki could truly wield a blade like Hassuiryou. But even so — there are still similarities. Possibilities, without a doubt. I think you’d probably make an excellent Shinigami, one day.”

“I don’t know if I’m more worried by the fact that *doesn’t* worry me as much as it should do, or the fact that I’m even having this conversation with a Shinigami Captain.” Uryuu rubbed his temples. “But surely when Ametatsu-san is sealed again, that part of my *reiryoku* will be sealed again, too? I won’t be able to wield a blade. That was what you said, wasn’t it? That was what happened to Shizuki Ametatsu’s spirit power?”

Ukitake’s eyes twinkled.

“Well, I suppose we’ll see.” He said vaguely. “While you’re alive, after all, it doesn’t matter. You don’t use that *reiryoku* to manifest your Quincy powers, and you’re not a Shinigami substitute like Ichigo-kun. So there’s plenty of time to figure all those things out.”

“I suppose right now I’m more concerned with getting those powers back.” Uryuu admitted. “So you’re right. I shouldn’t worry about anything else for the time being. But even if I can’t get those powers back, Ukitake-san… I’m still going to fight this Winter. Whatever I can do… because it matters to me to do something. Even if it’s just for pride’s sake… I want to.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Ukitake’s brown eyes softened. “But not surprised. After all, Shizuki would have said the same.”

He smiled, a nostalgic look crossing his features once more.

“I’ll go and I’ll do the best I can.” He murmured. “Even if I’m not as powerful or as experienced as Shihouin-taichou or Kuchiki-taichou, there must be something I can do to help. And whatever it is, I’ll do it. Because it’s important that we do something.”

“Ukitake-san?”

“That’s what he said to me, before he left.” Ukitake turned his gaze on his companion. “With exactly the same resolve in his eyes as you have in yours now.”

“Really?” Despite himself Uryuu was self-conscious. “I’m not sure how I feel about that. Maybe the sooner he’s sealed away from me the

better, then. I don't want to follow his actions or thoughts, after all. I want to follow mine."

"Then we'll act on that right away." Ukitake suggested, as they entered 13-Bantai's gateway, crossing the dusty ground towards the barracks. "I promised Kira that I'd seal the sword myself, and so I will. As for the rest — considering the manner of your coming here, I think it better that those elements were sealed from you once you return to the real world and your own physical body. Doing it here may put you in danger — and that's not something we want to risk."

"I suppose it would." Uryuu realised, glancing at his hands. "Right now I'm a Shinigami, but I shouldn't be, should I? This isn't right — and if you take all of Ametatsu-san's spirit power and memories out of me, I'll just be a severed soul."

Ukitake looked thoughtful for a moment, then he shook his head, reaching across to rest a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I don't think there's any 'just' about it." He murmured. "You're a Quincy, after all, are you not?"

"Well, yes, but…"

Ukitake smiled.

"I don't think there's so much difference between the Quincy and the Shinigami, when you come down to it." He mused absently, releasing his grasp and giving the teenager a gentle push towards the main barracks as the doors opened to reveal his impatient companions. "All of this has just shown it all the more. So I'm sure that your soul is not unremarkable, Ishida-kun. Not by a long shot."

Quincy are possessed of high spiritual power. So are Shinigami. Quincy hunt Hollows. So do Shinigami. Where, then, is the disparity?

Unbidden, Hassuiryou's words trickled across Uryuu's thoughts, and he smiled ruefully.

"Somehow I think I can tell that Ametatsu-san was trained by you, and so was Hassuiryou, Ukitake-san." He murmured. "But maybe, in the end, that's why he cared so much about the Quincy."

"Ah, I don't know about that." Ukitake laughed, shaking his head ruefully. "You give me far too much credit, I think."

Uryuu glanced at Hassuiryou once more, a faint flicker of regret stirring in his heart as he did so. Then, slowly, he held it out.

"Kira-san should have this." He murmured. "Not me. It's time I

stopped hiding behind someone else's weapon and found some of my own, after all."

Ukitake looked startled for a moment, then he nodded, taking the *zanpakutou* carefully in his grip.

"I understand." He said softly. "But don't you even want to say goodbye? After all, this sword is a part of your soul. Even if it was Shizuki's *zanpakutou* — you and it still have a connection."

"There's nothing to say." Uryuu shook his head. "Hassuiryou knows it as well as I do. We're not fighting partners, not really."

He reddened.

"And, well, he already knows everything about me." He murmured, embarrassed. "So there shouldn't need to be anything for me to say to him, or the other way around."

"I see." Comprehension flooded Ukitake's features. "Then go and join your friends. Leave the sword to me — I will see that it is properly taken care of."

He smiled.

"Take a chance to rest." He added. "It will take a good half-day at least to ready the Senkai Gate enough for Inoue-san to return with you and Ichigo-kun to the Real World, so you should take this opportunity to sit back and relax a little. All right?"

"All right." Uryuu looked surprised. "Thank you, Ukitake-san. And I'll think about everything you've said, too… I promise."

"Yes, I'm sure that you will." Ukitake agreed reflectively. He offered his companion a knowing smile, then, with his white *haori* sweeping out behind him he turned, making his way towards his own private quarters and leaving Uryuu on his own.

"Well, you came back in one piece." Ichigo exclaimed, as he, followed by Rukia and Orihime hurried across the courtyard to join the Quincy. "What did you do? You didn't go there to slice up Kurotsuchi, did you?"

"Don't be silly. Of course not." Uryuu gathered himself, shaking his head impatiently. "I only went to destroy the data he'd gathered on me, that's all."

"I'm glad." Orihime looked relieved. "We all felt the sword's reiatsu — and yours — so none of us knew what was going on."

"We thought you might've decided to clock him one after all,

considerin' how you went hell for leather 'gainst Byakuya." Ichigo added.

"Hassuiryou blew up Kurotsuchi's computer. That's all." Uryuu said dismissively. "Do you really think that, in my right mind, I'd fight anyone using a *Shinigami's* sword, Kurosaki? Give me a little credit. What do you think I am?"

"By the sounds of it, the same ol' Ishida Uryuu." Ichigo said frankly, but there was relief in his gaze as he clamped a heavy hand down on his classmate's shoulder. "Which is fine, I guess, because I wasn't so keen on the nutjob you had livin' in your belfry."

"He's still there, for now." Uryuu admitted. "But he's not… it's not like he can take over my mind any more. So it's all right."

"You mean Ukitake-taichou hasn't sealed those memories yet?" Rukia put in at that moment, casting him an anxious glance. "But…"

"He can't do it here. It's too dangerous." Uryuu shook his head. "I'm a Shinigami now because of Ametatsu-san, but if he was to sever that…"

"You'd be killed." Ichigo realised, and Uryuu nodded.

"Maybe." He agreed. "It's not something either he or I want to risk. So for now, there's nothing for us to do. He's taken the sword, and he's going to seal it again. Then Kira-san will be able to take it back to 1-Bantai and that will be that. The Gate has to be specially prepared so that Inoue-san can come back with us… so I guess maybe it'll be tomorrow before we leave Soul Society."

"I'm sorry to hold everyone up, then." Orihime looked sheepish, and Uryuu shook his head.

"To be honest, it might be nice just to stop moving for a bit." He admitted. "Everything over the past few weeks has been strange… at least now I'm starting to feel like we're approaching closure."

"Do you think Kurotsuchi feels that way?" Ichigo asked, suddenly serious for a moment as his gaze strayed towards 12-Bantai. Uryuu frowned, then he nodded his head.

"He said his studies into me were finished and he wasn't interested in the Quincy any more." He said slowly. "So I guess so. He can't recreate the data now, and if he tries to pull this trick on me again, well, Ukitake-san knows all about it and he'll get into a lot of trouble. So no. I think it's over, this time. He doesn't like it, perhaps. But I don't think he'll try and meddle with me again. At least, not in that

light. Someone like him always has something up his sleeve — but next time we meet, it won't be because of Shizuki Ametatsu."

"So much to the good, then." Ichigo let out a heavy sigh. "Because whether he was nuts or he wasn't, I think it's a good thing for everyone if that Shizuki guy is put away for keeps."

"It's what he wanted, too." Uryuu reflected. "Ametatsu-san, I mean. Even if he wasn't mad, he couldn't take back what he'd done and he couldn't move on. See, though, I'm not that way. I'm not the type of person who runs away… or the type of person who kills in a fit of rage."

He glanced up at the hazy blue sky.

"If I was, I'd have killed Kurotsuchi that time." He added. "So I guess, in the end, that's the real difference between who he was and who I am now."

"Enough of the philosophical shit." Ichigo said firmly. "You're getting a funny look in your eye again and I don't want you spacin' out, whatever you say about it. We're off the hook now, right? So we can go home an' do whatever we have t'do there. Right? Enough with the theorisin'. It's over. This time tomorrow, we'll be outta here."

"Ukitake-taichou intends to go with you himself, does he, to seal Shizuki's memories?" Rukia asked, and Uryuu shrugged.

"Don't know, but it seems that way." He agreed. "He said it was his business two centuries ago, so I guess he means to see it through to the end."

"That reminds me." Ichigo cast Orihime a glance. "You healed him, didn't you, Inoue? You used your Rikka shield so he could come an' stop Byakuya rippin' holes in Ishida, didn't you?"

Orihime pinkened, nodding her head as Uryuu glanced at her in surprise.

"Really?"

"Weren't you there when Ukitake-san said so?" Ichigo sent him a funny look, and Uryuu shrugged.

"I'm fuzzy where the battle is concerned, even now." He admitted. "It and the aftermath is still all blurry — I don't remember any of it clearly at all."

His eyes narrowed as he gazed at Orihime pensively.

"And you say you're useless?" He added. "You probably saved my

life by doing that, Inoue-san. Thank you."

Orihime held up her hands, shaking her head hastily.

"Really, it wasn't that big a deal!" She said hurriedly. "It was just… Ukitake-san is the one who really saved you. I just… I only helped a little bit. And it wasn't like I could cure him or anything. All I did was repair a little of the damage — really!"

"Every little helps, you know." Rukia eyed her keenly. "I thought the Taichou seemed to have recovered quickly, considering how he was before… but I guess that's why. I guess it's thanks to you after all, Inoue."

"No! Honestly, no, it's not like that at all!" Orihime protested. She frowned. "Besides, even if I did do something like that, it's not like I could fix anything really. Ukitake-san told me… some things about Shizuki-san while I was healing him. About why he wanted to help him — and about why he wanted to save Ishida-kun. And it made me sad… Shizuki-san really suffered a lot, in the end. And that part I couldn't fix. Not even by pretending to be Niji."

"We never did find out what happened to her, did we?" Rukia pursed her lips. "I wonder if Kira-fukutaichou came across it in his research."

"Kira?" Ichigo looked confused. "Why would he have? He was investigating the swords, wasn't he? Not the Quincy."

"That's true." Rukia acknowledged. "Then I suppose there isn't anyone who knows the answer to that question. Ukitake-taichou told me that he didn't know what had become of her, and if he doesn't remember, there won't be many other people who do, now."

"Mind you, from what Ukitake-san said to Byakuya, he didn't tell us the whole story to begin with." Ichigo pointed out. "Maybe he does know."

"No… I don't think he does." Uryuu shook his head. "If he did, why would he have needed to go get Inoue-san? He would have been able to use the real Niji, wouldn't he, if he'd have known how to find her."

"That's true." Ichigo acknowledged. "So I guess she really did just disappear. If souls can do that, when they come to Soul Society."

"I don't know." Rukia spread her hands helplessly. "Ginrei-jiisama might have known, since he went to the Real World with Shihouin and Shizuki, but even if he did, he's no longer around to ask. Besides, I never really knew how to speak to him anyway, so even if he had

been…”

“It’s sort of sad that way.” Orihime said pensively.

“What are you kids mooning over?”

As they made their way deeper into 13-Bantai’s quarters, Renji’s voice assailed them and they glanced up, seeing the Vice Captain approaching them, Kira in tow.

“Well?” As he reached them, Renji cast Uryuu a quizzical glance. “Did you sort out your problem properly, then? You all look like the world dropped on ya — don’t tell me you couldn’t fix it after all?”

“No, we fixed it all right.” Uryuu shook his head, meeting Renji’s gaze with an even one of his own. “The machine that held all the data met an unfortunate accident with some rain, so there won’t be any more research on that particular subject.”

“With *rain*?” Kira’s eyes opened wide at this, and he stared at Uryuu in disbelief. “Is that why you took the sword? You were going to use it… for that?”

“Yes.” Uryuu agreed. “I wasn’t ever going to fight a proper battle with someone else’s weapon, after all. But it needed to be done that way. Otherwise he’d have carried on — and I didn’t want that.”

“I see.” Kira looked thoughtful. “That’s why Ukitake-taichou let you take it, then. I suppose he realised what you intended to do…”

He frowned.

“But… you don’t have the sword any more, Ishida-san?”

“No.” Uryuu shook his head. “Ukitake-san took it. He said he was going to re-seal it, so that you could take it to 1-Bantai and complete the mission assigned you — or something like that. So I left it with him. It’s better that way, after all. It’s not my sword, and I’m not a Shinigami… I shouldn’t have a weapon like that in the first place.”

“If Ukitake-taichou has it, then it’s all right.” Relief flooded Kira’s azure gaze. “Thank you, Ishida-san.”

He paused, then bowed his head slightly towards his startled companion.

“I haven’t had a chance to say this, but I’m sorry that my weakness put you in danger.” He said sincerely. “3-Bantai is my responsibility and I should have been better prepared for what happened the night I found the swords… because of that, you were made to experience something bad. So I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention.”

He bit his lip.

“After all, I wanted to find them and get them sealed away again as quickly as I could, so I pushed my squad to their limits.” He added softly. “Because Kuchiki-taichou was adamant that if you got the sword, it might get you killed. And after everything that’s happened here… I didn’t want any more blood to be spilled. In the end, though, I probably made it worse by finding them without telling a Captain I was going to investigate beneath the squad buildings before I did it. I was in a hurry, but maybe…”

“Kira, you’re thinking too hard about things again.” Renji elbowed his friend firmly in the ribs, casting the bewildered Uryuu a rueful glance. “Noone’s blamin’ you for what happened at 3-Bantai, jus’ like noone’s blamin’ Ishida for takin’ a pot shot at Rukia or tryin’ to take down 6-Bantai. Shit’s happened, is all.”

“Abarai-kun’s right.” Uryuu gathered his wits, offering Kira a faint smile. “Besides, the sword wasn’t the thing that caused the problem, in the end. Finding it or not finding it… it didn’t really make the difference. It’s hard to explain exactly what I mean but… I know that it wasn’t Hassuiryou’s fault. Or yours, Kira-san.”

“See? It ain’t your fault, so don’t start beatin’ yourself up over shit again. Yeesh!” Renji gave him a shove, and Kira stumbled, casting his friend an embarrassed look as he steadied his balance.

“I suppose so.” He said sheepishly. “I just felt that… as the officer in charge of 3-Bantai, it was my responsibility. So it was my apology to make… and I wanted to make it.”

Uryuu stared at him for a moment, then he smiled.

“In that case, I accept it.” He said simply. “If you accept mine for causing your squad the hassle in the first place.”

“Ishida-san?” Kira blinked, then grinned. “I suppose that’s the Quincy pride I’ve heard about, huh?”

“Something like that.” Uryuu agreed. “We don’t run away from our mistakes, that’s all.”

Kira nodded, a strange kind of resolve in his expression.

“Nor do Shinigami.” He said quietly, even as Renji shot him a startled glance. “Now, if Ukitake-taichou has the *zanpakutou*, I should go and see him, I think. I’d like to take it to the Sou Taichou before it gets dark, if I can — then I can return to my own squad and see about setting up new training schedules and other things in preparation for

the months ahead. There's noone else to push it off onto, after all — so the sooner I begin, the sooner I'll finish."

He smiled wryly.

"After all, working hard is something I'm good at." He added lightly. "So I'm sure that whatever happens, I'll find a way to resolve it."

With that he bowed his head towards them once more, then turned, hurrying off across the dusty ground towards the exit gate.

"Renji… that guy's really an old buddy of yours?" Ichigo sent his friend a quizzical glance, and Renji nodded, frowning.

"I already told you so. What of it?"

"Nothing. Just he re-e-e-ally is a shitload more polite than you are, is all."

"What the hell are you tryin' to say, Ichigo?" Renji demanded. "Like hell you can talk, anyway, considerin' the crap that comes outta your cake-hole most of the time!"

"Shut up! We weren't talking about me, after all, Mr Vice Captain-san!"

As Ichigo and Renji's voices got louder and louder over 13-Bantai, Uryuu tuned out, casting a pensive glance in the direction Kira had gone.

Perhaps he's like me too, in the end. He lost his Captain, just like I lost my powers. But both of us are adapting and moving on. If he's a friend of Abarai's, there's no way he's a weak fighter, even if he's not a match yet for Kurotsuchi's level. And I… I'm no pushover either, with or without the powers I was born with. I'll work hard too, Kira-san. Neither of us can go back, after all. But we can go forward. Thanks to Hassuiryou, I think I will be able to do that… whatever the future brings.

"Ishida-kun?"

Orihime's concerned tones broke through his musing and he turned, sending her a rueful smile as he realised he'd been spacing out.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Uryuu assured her. "Just thinking about going home and that I'm glad at last things are starting to come together. I don't like things I can't make sense of — I think at last maybe it all does make sense. In a skewed, Shinigami-tainted way."

“It will be nice to go back, then.” Orihime grinned, relief lighting up her dark eyes, and Uryuu nodded his head.

“It will.” He mused. “Back to normality. Whatever *that* is.”

So the Quincy thought that he had won, did he?

Kurotsuchi hunched his shoulders, bending over the computer screen as he watched the darting, zipping fragments of data shoot from one side of the monitor to the other. Every so often, a distinct, pixellised flash blipped in one corner, steady and rhythmic, and as he touched his finger to it, a grim smile spread across the scientist’s features.

So naive. So beautifully naive. What kind of a scientist do you think I am, Ishida Uryuu? Do you think it’s so easy as that to put an end to my investigations?

He stood back, his gaze flitting darkly to the still smoking wreckage of his computer unit that stood discarded and abandoned by the furthest door. In the morning, he would have Akon and his team dismantle it, disposing of the innards in a permanent and effective manner. After all, he reflected blackly, it was of no further use to him. And yet, even as he gazed at it, he knew that not everything had been lost.

I may no longer have the data Nemu recorded, or the information on soul revival that Urahara Kisuke began investigating a century or more ago. But even so, there’s much to be taken from this experience. I have no wish to continue this experiment, after all. The loss of the data is irritating, but remarkably small in comparison to what could have been lost. My interest in Shizuki Ametatsu is at an end… besides, now Ukitake knows something of it, further investigation in that area would be unwise.

He shook his head thoughtfully.

No, better that they think what they’ve done has left me devastated and distracted. Far better that way. After all…

He crossed the room, resting his hand on the destroyed drive for a brief moment as he did so.

By using Hassuiryou to destroy this, he’s unmistakeably left the marks of his reiatsu here for me to analyse. I told him my interest in him was at an end, but in truth I think it’s really just beginning. After all, Nemu’s bacterial solution is still clinging valiantly to every cell of his blood, allowing me to clock his movements exactly whenever I should want to.

A cold glint entered his eyes.

Shizuki Ametatsu did not release Hassuiryou that last time. Ishida Uryuu did. And whether he realises it or not, he drew on his own spiritual strength to do so. As a Shinigami, it seems his power is not so sealed away as it is when he is in his human form. Even if I no longer have the data recorded from the fight against Kuchiki-taichou, I know already that it was not the same reiatsu guiding that sword. There was no killer strength behind it — like a newborn child playing with a new toy for the first time, he had no true understanding of how to wield it. Yet even knowing that it was not his master's will, Hassuiryou accepted his command. Is the boy's power, then, that compelling? Or is there something else — something I have not yet accounted for?

He pursed his lips.

Yes, Ishida-kun. I'm afraid this has only just begun.

"Mayuri-sama?"

Nemu pushed back the sliding door of the lab, crossing the floor silently towards him, and Kurotsuchi turned, eying her quizzically.

"Well? What word, then, from our neighbours? They are sending the boy home, correct? And the sword… tell me, Nemu, what has Ukitake done to the sword?"

"Yes, Mayuri-sama." Nemu raised her gaze to his, and Kurotsuchi found himself mildly irritated by the emptiness in her dark eyes. "It is as you suspected. Ukitake-taichou has taken the sword and has sealed it in the manner Mayuri-sama predicted. Kira-fukutaichou has taken it to 1-Bantai, and it will be resealed there with Eishoushi and the other weaponry until further notice."

"I see." Kurotsuchi's eyes narrowed until they were almost slits. "Then Ukitake also sees what I saw, it seems. That the boy's own spirit power is sleeping, not lost after all. And more, he seeks to do as I do — to ensure that the boy has some way of wielding it, even when it seems all hope has gone. How ironic, when he believes he's acting for the boy's benefit."

He smiled coldly.

"All he's done is complete the final stage of my plan to perfection." He murmured. "To allow Ishida Uryuu the opportunity to further entertain me by once more using his Quincy powers to fight. The sword is no longer important. Shizuki Ametatsu was far too unstable to be of any use to me or to Soul Society in the future. But the boy is still interesting to me. And, it seems, he's interesting to Ukitake and

the rest of Soul Society too. I imagine we will have cause to meet him again, Nemu — come the conflict this Winter."

"Yes, Mayuri-sama."

Kurotsuchi frowned. Had he imagined it, or had there been the faintest flicker of pleasure in Nemu's normally schooled gaze at those words?

"Do not become fond of him, foolish girl." He ordered sharply. "I will not tolerate it. You act only on the instructions I give you… I have no time for you developing feelings of your own, or concerning yourself with the life of one human test subject."

There was a moment of silence, then, slowly, Nemu bowed her head.

"Yes, Mayuri-sama." She whispered, and Kurotsuchi sighed, shoving her aside as he turned back to his screen.

The pulsing, pixel flash still kept its rhythm, and at the sight of it, the scientist's lips twitched once more into a smile.

"Every beat of your heart, my system is keeping track of." He murmured. "Hurry up and relocate your Quincy power, boy. Then the really interesting part will truly begin!"

Epilogue: Beneath The Dragon's Wings

Epilogue: Beneath the Dragon's Wings

"Well?"

As Ukitake stepped through the Senkai Gate, Kyouraku was waiting for him, pink coat billowing in the wind as he cast his old friend a questioning look. "Are you going to accept now that what's done is done, and finally take it easy?"

"If you like, I'll take it easy for a week together, now." A smile touched Ukitake's lips, and he nodded his head. "I'm sorry to have caused you so much worry, Kyouraku. But… you do understand, don't you? Why I had to get involved."

"Knowing you as long as I have? No surprise at all." Kyouraku told him evenly. "Though you should think about it every once in a while, you know. You were quite a smart kid, once upon a time. Surely someone with that potential shouldn't take so many centuries as this to realise that putting his body through the mill doesn't benefit anyone at all."

"My body has to keep up with what my mind wants it to do." Ukitake said frankly, as the two men made their way slowly towards Ukitake's small water-side quarters. "If that ever changes, Kyouraku, that will be the day I let go of this life and move on for good. You know it as well as I do. So long as I've got a will to live, nothing will happen to me. And I'm too aware of too many pointless sacrifices to lose that will. Life is precious and should be preserved — even if there are obstacles."

"I'll save my breath, then." Kyouraku rubbed his chin ruefully. "Are you up to a drink? Or should convalescents not ingest sake? Dai-senpai might have issue with it, but after the last few days…"

"You never need an excuse to drink, my friend." Ukitake's eyes twinkled with humour. "And don't let me stand in your way. Only my throat is still somewhat raw — I won't chance it for now."

"Fair enough. More for me that way." Kyouraku reflected. "Your subordinates would be quite shocked, I think, if they knew how much their Captain could put away without losing his balance."

"It's one of the many survival skills I've learnt from our long and

eventful friendship." Ukitake said comfortably, and Kyouraku laughed appreciatively, tipping his hat in a mocking gesture of acknowledgement.

"Touche." He murmured, as his friend slid back the door of the sleeping quarters. "Well, Juu-kun, so all's well that ends well, is it? The boy is safely back in his world, the memories are sealed… everything is back how it should be?"

"Mm." Ukitake's eyes narrowed, and he paused, eying his companion carefully. "Now why did you just ask me that? Surely my return here is proof enough that everything has been taken care of. Kira's taken the sword to Genryuusai-sensei already, and Ishida Uryuu and his companions are back where they belong. Why would you question me, with that particular look in your eye?"

"Particular look?" Kyouraku feigned innocence. "You sound as suspicious as Nanao-chan, talking like that!"

"Well?" Ukitake gestured for his companion to enter, shutting the sliding door behind them. "There's something you want to ask me, isn't there? Ask it, and I'll see if I can answer… at least, while there's just the two of us alone."

Kyouraku eyed him for a moment, then he smiled, nodding his head.

"It's too long an acquaintance for either of us to fool the other where motives are concerned." He said resignedly. "All right. It's not as though I intend to do anything about it either way, mind you, but… you didn't seal Ametatsu-kun's sword, did you? Yama-jii may have it now, but it's not like before."

Ukitake did not answer right away, and Kyouraku arched an eyebrow.

"No secrets between old friends, Juushirou." He scolded. "I'm right, then? You didn't seal it after all?"

"No… I did seal it." At length Ukitake raised his gaze, a flicker of guilt and sheepishness in his dark eyes. "But perhaps not *quite* as it was before."

"Mm." Kyouraku pursed his lips. "And that means?"

"Hassuiryou's *reiryoku* was severed, just as Central 46's papers decreed." Ukitake said slowly. "However… I may have forgotten to… *completely* sever the link between that latent Shinigami magic and the core areas of Ishida-kun's soul. After all, I *have* been tired lately, and

feverish. And whilst Shizuki's memory matter is safely shut away, perhaps I wasn't… as careful as I might have been where the other was concerned."

Amusement lit up Kyouraku's gaze at this and he clapped down his hand warmly on his friend's shoulder.

"You are a sly devil, just like I thought." He mused. "And? Does he know that you were… er… shall we say, careless with your responsibilities?"

"Ishida-kun knows nothing about it." Ukitake shook his head. "Because of how he's grown and trained, it probably won't have any great bearing on his current situation in any case. It's up to him to find his Quincy power — there's nothing we can do about that. But… I suppose that I did think it a shame that a boy with that potential should be deprived the chance of ever utilising it properly. After all…"

"After all, Ametatsu-kun was a damn fine Shinigami, till things went bad." Kyouraku said softly. "And you see him, don't you, in that boy's eyes?"

"Yes." Ukitake admitted. "Though Ishida-kun is himself, and I wouldn't change that… seeing Hassuiryou released after so long brought back many, many memories. Shizuki was a man I worked hard with for a long time. I invested a lot in that soul, Kyouraku… I won't relinquish its strength lightly. Shizuki made one mistake, and he paid for it dearly. I won't have that carried any further on. Ishida-kun didn't kill Kurotsuchi, after all. He's learnt that lesson and moved on. So I think… it's not like it was when Shizuki died. Then we didn't know what kind of being might possess the soul in the future. Now… now we do. And I think it a good thing if the *reiryoku* that once summoned Hassuiryou should be returned to its rightful owner."

"In doing so, you realise, you effectively rendered Hassuiryou dead."

"Yes, I know." Ukitake sighed, sinking down on his bedcovers as he slowly slipped off his *haori*. "And that hurt too, I admit it. But Shizuki is dead and noone but him should command that sword. Besides, the blade itself might be dead, now — but it's safer that way in many respects. And the spirit of it… that's a part of Ishida-kun just like it was part of Shizuki, too. It's not the end. I rather hope it might be a beginning."

"That rests with the boy himself, doesn't it?"

"Yes." Ukitake agreed. "Which is why I've not told him what I've

done. If he benefits from it, he does. If not, well, so be it. The choices are his to make and his alone. I've done what I can for Shizuki and for Ishida-kun, too. At last, I think, I've closed that book."

"That's something at least." Kyouraku rolled his eyes, settling himself cross-legged on the floor opposite his companion. "If only there wasn't a whole library full of other ones waiting for you to do the same."

"That's what happens when you live as long as we have, I suppose." Ukitake smiled ruefully. "But even so, I wouldn't change it. So long as those books still exist, I won't be letting go of this life so easily. You can rest assured about that — I've far too much to do even with this faulty body to give up and call it a day yet."

"Well, I'll drink to that." A rueful smile spread across Kyouraku's lazy features as he slipped his fingers beneath his *haori*, pulling out a stoppered flask of sake and setting it down before him as he hunted for the ceramic *sakazuki* cup. "Besides, Nanao is looking for me again — you don't mind me staying here a while, do you? It's too nice a day to be shut away going over paperwork."

Ukitake laughed, shaking his head.

"Poor Nanao." He scolded. "You shouldn't be so mean to her, Kyouraku. You'd be lost without her."

"Mm, I know." Kyouraku agreed good-naturedly. "But it just so happens that she's cute when she's angry. And that makes the job less of a chore… if you know what I mean."

He winked at his friend.

"You've had male Vice Captains for far too long, so you wouldn't understand the appeal." He said teasingly. "But you know, it might be time you tried having a woman as your second in command. You never know, Juu-kun. It might be right up your street."

Ukitake's eyes narrowed for a moment, and he pursed his lips, sending his friend another searching look. At his silence, Kyouraku's smile widened, and he pulled the stopper from his flask, filling the shallow cup and lifting it, twitching it in a mock toast to his friend before draining the contents.

"You should think about it seriously." He advised. "13-Bantai's been without a Vice Captain for far too long, after all, and Kaien would be the first to tell you to move on. After all, it's not like you don't have options open to you."

“Mm. I know.” Ukitake nodded, returning his companion’s smile as a look of understanding passed between them. “But we’re facing a war this Winter. That has priority in my mind for now.”

“Surely that’s all the more reason to act, with that in the offing.”

“Yes, but it’s not a decision I take lightly.” Ukitake shook his head. “And it’s really not just my decision to make.”

He shrugged.

“Things will resolve themselves, in the end.” He said philosophically. “Just as they always do. For the time being, things are fine as they are. After all, there are three squads without Captains at the present time. Their need is greater than mine. And I’ve run 13-Bantai without a Vice Captain before. It’s not as hard as it might seem, and I’ve Kiyone and Sentarou to back me up. Really.”

“Well, if you say so.” Kyouraku sat back against the beam of his friend’s chamber, suddenly becoming serious. ‘But a lot’s going to change in this war this Winter, you know. We’ve been through crises before and we’ve survived them. But this may yet be the hardest one we’ve come to face. If we’re all standing at the end of it… it will be a miracle to say the least. Keep that in mind, huh, before you push everything aside. I know I’m not a person who should be lecturing on taking action,’ As Ukitake arched an eyebrow, “But you’ll have to take my hypocrisy this time and listen to me. Because there’s a very real chance that someone will die come the Winter, Ukitake. Possibly more than one someone. And if that happens…”

“If that happens, Soul Society will heal and move forward without them, as it’s done so many times before.” Ukitake said sadly. “If it’s me, if it’s you, if it’s one of the young Captains, like Hitsugaya, trying to prove himself as a Captain in the eyes of everyone. If it’s one like Kira, looking for his confidence… or Abarai, acting on his emotions and charging into battle on a moment’s impulse. Even if it’s Genryuusai-sensei… at the end of the day, all Soul Society can do is pull together and move on.”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“Otherwise, it doesn’t bear thinking about.” He murmured. “Even if we have to rely on those Real World kids more than we should… or Urahara, or others not yet taken into consideration…”

“Others… like Hirako Shinji and his fellows?” Kyouraku narrowed his eyes. “Did you ask Urahara about them too, when you went on your little jaunt?”

“I didn’t, and I haven’t raised the subject with Genryuusai-sensei, but it crossed my mind that he of all people probably knows where they are.” Ukitake responded. “And in this fight, Kyouraku, everyone counts. Which is why I think we shouldn’t break connections with Urahara a second time. Every little helps, after all… and Aizen is their enemy as much as he’s become ours.”

“True enough.” Kyouraku said soberly. “Well, what will be will be, I dare say.”

He filled the *sakazuki* once more, holding it up.

“To all of us coming safely through what’s ahead.” He said softly. “And most of all, to the fact that there will still be a Soul Society standing when the dust finally settles over the Winter war.”

The cemetery was silent that afternoon, and as Uryuu walked between the lines of neat marble stones, he found himself glad of the solitude. Over his head, birds wheeled, calling to one another in their distinctive, shrieking way, yet even this somehow did not disturb the peace that hung over this place of memory and contemplation.

He had not been here in a long time, but today he had felt that it was the right place to be.

A rueful expression touched his features, and he glanced down in embarrassment at the small cluster of flowers in his hand as he realised the sentimentality of what he was doing.

Kurosaki wouldn’t understand, I don’t think, so I’m glad he can’t see this. I’m glad none of them can. They think it’s over and behind us, and it is. Better it’s left that way. This is the closure. This is the final act.

He pursed his lips, pausing to gaze up at the sky.

It had taken a little time to hunt up the right archive in the Karakura Town Library, but persistance was one of his strongest skills and he had persevered, telling the helpful librarians behind the counter that he was looking into his family’s history. It wasn’t a complete lie, either, he knew, for the person he had come to see was connected to him by blood, even if, until recently, he had not even known her name.

Had his father known the story? For a moment Uryuu pondered on this, picturing Ryuuken’s stiff, unyielding form in his mind as he reflected on whether his doctor father had known about Ametatsu at all. If he had, he mused, would he have consented so easily to his Grandfather’s choice of name? Would he have insisted on sticking

with tradition, then, or would he still have allowed his son to be called 'Rain Dragon'?

Well, it's not as though I'll ever be able to ask him that myself, so I suppose it's better I don't wonder too much about that side of things.

Uryuu's lips thinned.

It has to do with the Quincy, after all. And he doesn't care about that, so he wouldn't understand.

He turned left, crossing the cemetery to where a row of older looking tombs still stood defiant against the wind and rain. He cast his gaze along the line, pausing as the penultimate one caught his eye, and a faint smile touched his lips as he made his way towards it.

"Good afternoon, Niji-san." He murmured, pausing awkwardly for a moment before dropping down on his knees before the element-smoothed tower of marble. Slowly and self-consciously he set the flowers down on the base of the stone, then reached out the fingers of his left hand, running the tips along the worn insides of the three kanji that made up the young woman's name.

He read the inscription slowly, squinting as one or two of the kanji were difficult to make out.

"*Ishida Niji.*
Aged 21
24th September 1801
'At rest beneath the wings of her guardian angel'"

His eyes narrowed as he recognised the two rough characters carved in the stone alongside the words for 'guardian angel', so faint and worn now that they were barely even legible. They had clearly been added after the fact, by a young hand with an unsharpened instrument, yet somehow they did not seem to be graffitti so much as a secret message from a mourner to one beyond the grave.

"Rain Dragon." He whispered. "No. It's not, is it? It's not Rain Dragon, but *Ametatsu*. It's *his* name."

He bit his lip, gazing up at the sky as he composed his emotions.

"There's so much I don't know about my family, after all." He said aloud. "That a Shinigami's name is scribed on a Quincy's grave… that was what it meant to you, wasn't it, Kenkyuu-san? When you buried your sister, and went on to carry the Quincy traditions she died for on into the present day. He was a Shinigami, but he wasn't your enemy. And that's why, in the end, Grandfather persisted in believing in the

possibility of us working together. Even when Soul Society rejected him, time and time again, he persevered. He was looking for a Shinigami like Ametatsu-san… one who would hear our voice and put an end to generations of conflict."

He sighed heavily, absently wondering if the Shinigami his people had so hopefully searched for was Ichigo. Then he frowned, pushing the thought aside.

"Perhaps I'm getting a little closer to the things you wanted to teach me, sensei." He murmured, brushing the stone of Niji's worn grave a second time. "I don't have Ametatsu-san's memories any more, but it's like Ukitake-san said. I still remember who he was and what he did. Even if I don't see those things from his perspective any more, or feel the things that flooded his heart that night. I still understand who he was. He's not forgotten any more. Even if all of Soul Society deny his existence — so far as the Quincy are concerned, so long as I have this name, he still exists."

His eyes narrowed.

"And I'll keep fighting." He muttered. "For the sake of Quincy pride — my pride, Niji-san's pride, and Ametatsu-san's pride, too. For the sake of continuing the Quincy values, so far as I can. Somehow, I'll find a way to regain what I lost. And when the Winter comes, I'll be ready."

"Everything seems to have settled down again so quickly, doesn't it?"

At the sound of Orihime's voice, Uryuu found himself jerked from his reverie, raising his surprised blue eyes to her quizzical grey ones as his classmate dropped down beside him on the rain-damp grass.

"I'm sorry." She said apologetically, taking in his astonishment with a sheepish grin. "I saw you coming here, so I thought I'd come speak to you. You've been a little quiet since we got back, and I wanted to be sure it was all okay. And I was coming here anyhow, to see my brother, so…"

She trailed off, shrugging in her usual, happy-go-lucky way, and somehow at the sight of it, Uryuu felt his pensive mood lifting.

"I'm fine." He said softly. "I've just been thinking about things a little, that's all. And I thought that this should be somewhere I came. After all… she's a part of my past too, even if I didn't know it before."

"I thought you didn't remember anything about that now." Orihime's gaze strayed to the stone, taking in the name as she did so.

“But this is… Niji-san’s grave?”

“Yes.” Uryuu agreed. “And I haven’t lost my memory, Inoue-san. It’s not like that. I can’t feel things the way he did, true. But it’s not gone. What happened to him — to them. I know and I won’t forget.”

He shrugged, looking self-conscious.

“It seems stupid, I know, but in a way Ametatsu-san is gone without ever knowing what happened to her.” He added, embarrassed. “I suppose we’ll never know what really happened to Niji’s soul. Maybe she was reborn. Maybe she was confined. Maybe she’s still in Rukongai somewhere. Noone knows.”

“Maybe she became a Shinigami, in order to find Ametatsu-san.” Orihime looked uncharacteristically pensive. “I’m sorry about that, in a way, you know.”

“You’re sorry?” Uryuu stared at her in confusion. “Whyever for? What have you got to be sorry about, Inoue-san? You got dragged into something that wasn’t your problem from the start!”

“I know, and that’s what I’m sorry about.” Orihime said confusingly. Then, at Uryuu’s mystified expression, she laughed, holding up her hands sheepishly.

“Sorry. That came out funny.” She admitted. “But what I mean is… I’m sorry for not being Niji. If I had been, then you’d have known, and so would Ametatsu-san. But I’m not. At least, I don’t think I am. Because Niji-san was a Quincy, wasn’t she? She had powerful *reiryoku* when she was born. I… I only got mine because of Kurosaki-kun helping my brother to cross over. If not for that, I never would have… so I can’t be her. And it’s sad, because it means we don’t know where she really is.”

She sighed pensively.

“He wanted me to be her, I know he did.” She murmured. “So I feel sorry, in the end, that I wasn’t.”

Uryuu stared at her for a moment, then a slow smile touched his lips.

“You don’t have to be sorry for that.” He assured her. “You’re Inoue Orihime, and that’s enough, I think, for the time being.”

“Really?” Orihime looked surprised. “Sometimes I wonder. Sometimes I’m really not any use at all.”

“This wasn’t one of those times, even if that was true… which I

don't think it is." Despite himself, Uryuu felt comforted by his companion's honest and innocent observations. "You helped Ukitake-san to come and intervene between Byakuya-san and I. I remember it now, bits and pieces of that fight, and what would have happened to me if it had continued. I would have been killed, if you hadn't been involved. So in the end, you were very useful. And I know Ukitake-san thinks so too."

"Maybe." Orihime looked doubtful. "But if I hadn't been there, Kurotsuchi-san wouldn't have kidnapped me and you wouldn't have got into danger trying to save me."

Uryuu was silent for a moment, then he shook his head.

"That was my fault, not yours." He said gravely. "Kurotsuchi grabbed you because he knew it would make me come. He knew that my pride wouldn't allow any of my allies to be hurt, especially by a monster like him. It's like I said, Inoue-san. You were pulled into something that had nothing to do with you in the first place. None of what happened is anything you should feel to blame for."

Orihime offered him a smile.

"Thank you for saying so." She said sincerely. "But I think I still need to get stronger."

"So do we all." Uryuu murmured, glancing back at the gravestone.

"Still, it's a bit sad that Niji-san died and Ametatsu-san died and they weren't able to meet up again." Orihime reflected. "It's sort of like Romeo and Juliet, don't you think? Only it was real."

"Mm. I suppose so." Uryuu bit his lip. "Which reminds me, Inoue-san, I… I want to apologise to you. For what happened that day in Karakura."

"For what…?" Orihime stared at him, then pinkened as she realised what he was referring to. "Oh. *That.* You… you can remember all of that too, now?"

"Yes. All of it." Uryuu nodded, dropping his gaze as colour crept up into his own cheeks. "I remember what I said, and what I did. Even if I was acting outside of my own impulses… it was wrong and I'm sorry."

"You know, if you keep looking like that, your brow will be as scrunchy as Kurosaki-kun's." Orihime's grey eyes lit up and she smiled, reaching over impulsively to grasp him by the hand. He stared at her, flustered by the sudden contact between them, and at his expression, Orihime laughed.

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed about it any more.” She said firmly. “It really *wasn’t* about you and me, after all. It was about Ametatsu-san and Niji-san and they’re both long gone away now. And because of everything that happened to them, in a way I… I’m glad that for a moment I was able to help. That Ametatsu-san was able to be happy for a moment again because he thought he’d found the person he loved, even if it wasn’t real. So it’s all right, Ishida-kun. You can forget about it again and we’ll move on. It’s not your fault, after all. You didn’t mean to kiss me, did you?”

“Of course not!” Uryuu reacted immediately, shaking his head emphatically as he pulled his hands back from her touch. “In the middle of a street, where anyone could be looking, and with a girl who I’m not even dating… of course I wouldn’t do something like that! I’m not that kind of person!”

“I know you’re not.” Orihime dimpled. “You’re a Quincy so you have pride and honour and all of those things. So it’s really all right, Ishida-kun. I mean it. I’m not angry about it — not even at Ametatsu-san. And especially not at you. You tried to protect me from the Hollow and you got hurt because of it. In the end it’s probably my fault too.”

She shrugged, dismissing it in her usual, happy-go-lucky way.

“Besides, it wasn’t like it was horrible.” She added carelessly. “I mean, it was a surprise and all, but it wasn’t like it made me want to throw up or you know, like I’d suddenly had to eat something really really awful or anything like that.”

“*Inoue-san*!” It was impossible for Uryuu to go any redder, and at his face, Orihime laughed sheepishly, spreading her hands.

“Sorry. I guess for you that doesn’t make it any better, huh?” She said apologetically. “But it really is all right, Ishida-kun. We’re friends, aren’t we? And we’ll stay that way. So it’s okay. We’ll put it behind us and move on.”

“All right.” Uryuu gave up, taking a deep breath as he struggled to steady his suddenly beating heart. “I think that would be the best thing. So long as you know it’s not something I do to girls — not even girls who are friends of mine — then that’s all right.”

“I always knew that, Ishida-kun.” Orihime assured him. “Besides, it made me sort of happy, too.”

“Happy?” Uryuu blinked at her in disbelief, and Orihime nodded.

“I feel like all of this happening has meant we’ve got closer.” She

said, absently twisting a lock of thick red hair around her finger as she did so. “All of us, I mean. And I like when that happens. I mean you just said that we were friends, without me having to coax it out of you. And you didn’t do that before. So I’m glad.”

“Did I?” Uryuu was startled, and Orihime smiled.

“You did.” She agreed. “And even though Sado-kun didn’t come to Soul Society with us this time, I know Kurosaki-kun’s told him everything, so it’s not like he’s been left out. So in the end only good things happened. Ametatsu-san can be at peace now. You’re not blacking out any more, and you’re not having to be a Shinigami. So it’s fine.”

“I still don’t have my powers.” Uryuu said regretfully, and Orihime frowned.

“True.” She said gravely. “I’m sorry, Ishida-kun. I don’t know, even with my healing power, how to help you get them back.”

She spread her hands, gazing at her slender fingers as she did so.

“Perhaps one day, I’ll be able to do things like that. If I work really hard.” She reflected. “It took a lot of energy to help Ukitake-san’s chest heal, even a little bit, but it was enough to make a difference. So perhaps… one day I’ll be able to do more than that. Maybe eventually I’ll be able to use my power to help lots of people, not just my friends. And then I won’t feel like I’m so useless any more.”

“For the last time, Inoue-san, noone thinks you’re useless.” Uryuu got to his feet, hesitating for a moment then holding out a hand to pull her up and she glanced at him, accepting the awkward gesture with a smile.

“I suppose we’ll see, come the Winter.” She mused. “Still, it was nice to visit Soul Society again. Plus we got to meet Renji-kun’s friend Kira-kun. And it’s always nice to make new friends.”

“So long as you don’t add Kurotsuchi to that list.” Uryuu said darkly, and Orihime shrugged.

“He seems to be a friend of Urahara-san’s, though.” She said tactlessly. “So maybe he’s not as bad as he sometimes seems to be.”

“Urahara has more secrets and tricks up his sleeve than he’s ever shared with us.” Uryuu’s mind flitted back to the conversation he had overheard the night he had stayed in the shop premises. Had he been meant to overhear it? Had Urahara and Yoruichi spoken the truth when referring to the potential return of his power, or had it just been

a ploy in order to keep him from giving up all hope?

He sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Even so, Kurotsuchi is no ally of ours.” He said quietly. “And you should beware of him, Inoue-san. He’s used you to get to me this time. I won’t accept it, if he tries it again. Next time, no matter what, if he tries to hurt you, I will take him down. Permanently, if it’s what it takes.”

“You don’t need to go so far as that.” Orihime scolded him. “It all ended right, in the end.”

She offered him a bright smile, grasping his hand once more and giving his arm a little tug.

“Come on. It’s cold and damp out here, and I’m hungry. Let’s go get ice cream — my treat!”

“If you’re cold, Inoue-san, why do you want ice cream?” Uryuu stared at her blankly, and Orihime laughed.

“Because ice cream always tastes good, no matter what the weather.” She said simply. “What flavour do you like best, Ishida-kun? I always keep changing my mind, depending on the day…”

As she continued off on one of her characteristic rambles, Uryuu tuned out, turning to glance at her as a faint smile touched his lips.

It takes far more strength to fight for another, after all, than it does to simply fight for yourself.

Hassuiryou’s words suddenly echoed through his thoughts, and though he knew that the sword was long since re-sealed, Uryuu found the sound of them somewhat reassuring. Hassuiryou was not his weapon, and they would no longer talk the way they had in Soul Society. Yet, in that brief instant, Uryuu had felt that their bond had not been completely severed. That somehow, his time with the Dragon’s sword had helped him too — and that, from this point on, he would be able to move forward.

*The only one preventing you from doing anything is **you**, Uryuu.*

“That’s more true than I ever realised.” He muttered to himself. “Thank you, Hassuiryou. I won’t forget.”

“Mm? Did you say something, Ishida-kun?” Orihime shot him a startled look, and Uryuu reddened, shaking his head.

“No. Nothing.” He assured her. “Only that I think the rain’s stopping… at long last.”

“Rain?” Orihime looked bewildered. “It’s not raining, Ishida-kun — are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

Uryuu eyed her for a moment, then he laughed, shaking his head.

“It doesn’t matter.” He murmured, as, somewhere at the back of his thoughts, the faint flickering image of two silhouetted figures danced across his senses. Their images were blurred and hazy by the stretch of time, yet beyond all doubt Uryuu knew who they were, and his smile widened.

“From now on, Inoue-san, I have a feeling everything is going to be all right.”

Author’s note: The End!

Well, that’s it. Rain Dragon’s conclusion :) ***Thank you to everyone who supported the story and to anyone who will support it in the future.*** *I’ve had a lot of fun and I hope people have enjoyed it and not been disappointed or anything like that (worry, worry) with the conclusion.*

A couple of geek notes… for anyone whose browsers can cope with Kanji,

Niji’s grave inscription in Japanese:

石田虹
21歳
1801年9月24日
「守護天使の羽の下で休んでいます」

As I think I said in an earlier chapter, Niji means ‘rainbow’. 1801 because it’s 200 years before Bleach began in 2001. No other reason. September was random. :P Oh, and of course, on a Japanese grave, the kanji would be vertical, which is why “Ametatsu”’s name kanji is scribed alongside, not above the characters for guardian angel. In case that was confusing at all. (I just can’t make the computer format it like that, meh)

Finally, I’ve hinted around it a few times, but in case it wasn’t obvious — 10-Bantai was chosen because of the Quincy cross. Hassuiryou was designed based on the rain dragon theme and also on the way that Ishida attacks in the Hueco Mundo arc with his new bow. Ukitake didn’t sever the reiryoku this time, after all. So even though Hassuiryou is dead, a part of him remains in the firing of Ishida’s new bow. (Isn’t fanfiction great?)

As for Orihime not being Niji, that’s open to interpretation. Perhaps Ishida’s affection for her was what made her his ‘Niji’ after all. But equally, if Niji was a condemned soul, even if Ginrei had saved her and her

kin from destruction, her reiryoku would likely have suppressed or severed when she died (remembering how Byakuya went to kill Ichigo when he came to the Real World the first time).So there's every chance of her having been reborn in the Real World without any native power of her own. And it shouldn't be forgotten that Orihime's power manifested itself as projectiles, just like the Quincy use a bow and arrow.

It's up to people reading to decide if they want Orihime to be Niji or not ;) That's why I left it so open as I did, regarding her fate!!

And this is only fan-babble, but I always think that Rukia is being primed up to be the next VC of 13-Bantai. So you can read that into what Kyouraku and Ukitake were saying. It's not for sure so I didn't say it for sure. But I can imagine it's crossed Ukitake's mind…;)